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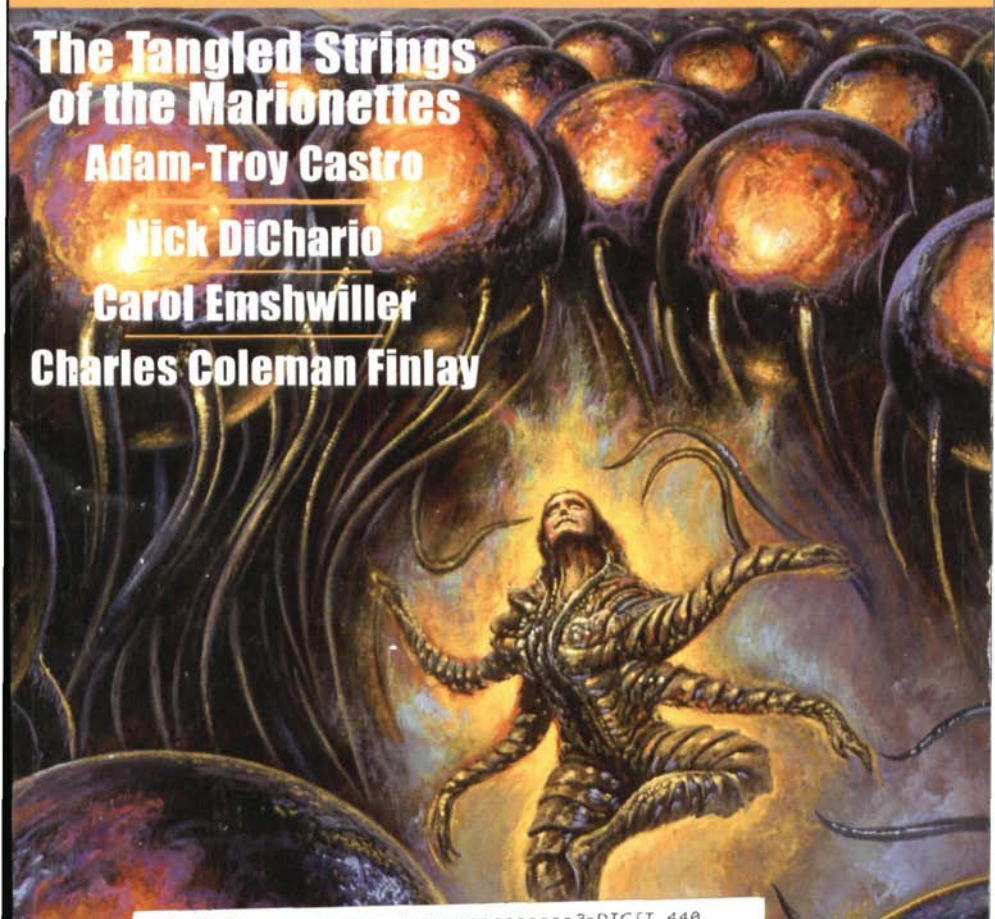

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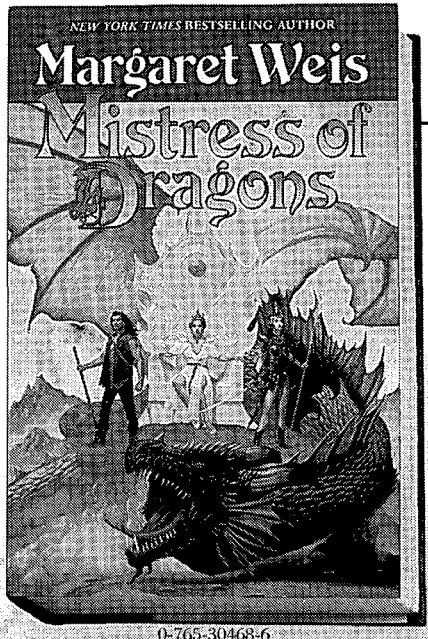

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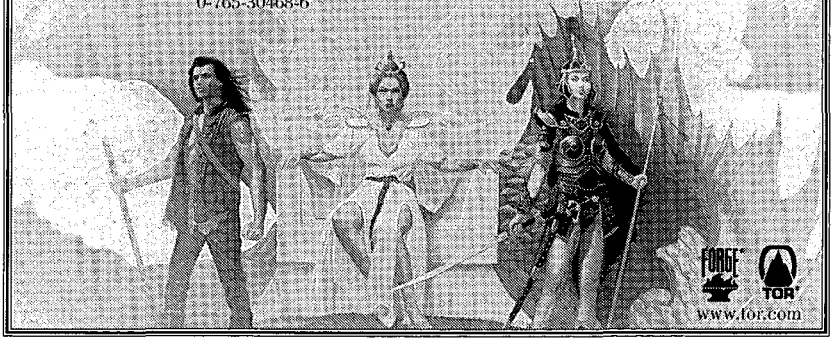

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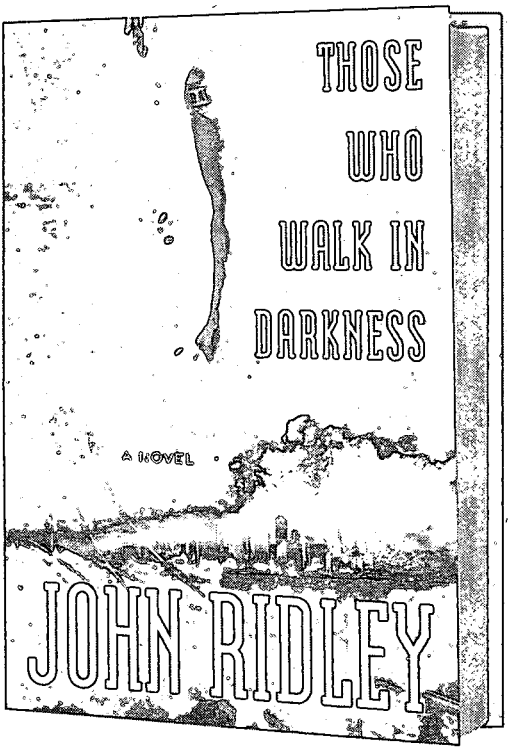

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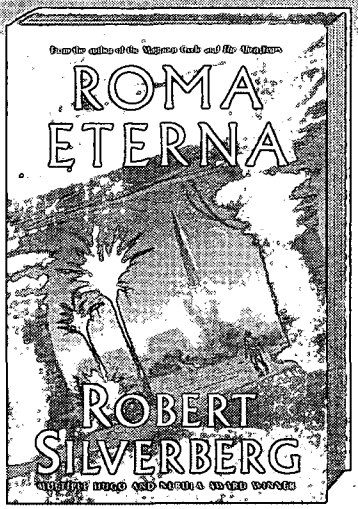

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Charlie Finlay lives in Columbus, Ohio, and writes across a broad spectrum, from satire to speculation, from hard sf to heroic fantasy. His new story peeks into a pocket of the Arthurian mythos that hasn't been examined very closely.

Wild Thing

By Charles Coleman Finlay

Chrétien sows the seed
of a story he only begins,
and lodges it in such fertile loam
it's bound to bring a good yield.
—*Perceval (Le Cont du Graal)*

HE WAS THE SORT OF BOY who always had a stick in his hand unless he chanced to have a stone. Today he held one of each as he ran in the mote-stirred sunlight. He skirted the plashes of water, pressed through the bulrushes, and paused on a small rise with his head cocked alertly.

"He's a nuisance," Howl muttered, sitting on a branch.

"I like him," Pooka whispered from his perch beside Howl.

"He's a mud-spattered, ratty-haired, goat-footed, frog-legged, spider-fingered, stick-swinging, rock-throwing nuisance."

"That's exactly why I like him."

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Pooka snatched a ball of sunlight from the air and spun it, thrust fingers in his mouth and emitted a bird-loud whistle. He tumbled backward off the branch, landing on his feet just as the rock clipped Howl on the temple. Tiny periwinkle trousers cartwheeled through the air and Howl crashed upside down in the bushes. Pooka laughed.

A stick javelined into the leaves, resulting in a cry of "Oof!" Before Pooka could react, the boy landed on the pile and grabbed Howl.

"I got you!"

"Oh no you don't," Pooka answered, but not so the lad could hear him. He and Howl were almost as tall as human toddlers, but thinner and much lighter. Buzzing like a hive of hornets, Pooka jumped on the wild boy's head, drew his little dagger, and inflicted several quick pricks across the scalp and neck.

The boy flailed his hand at the back of his head. "Eyah!"

"*Bzzzzzzz*," Pooka hummed as he jabbed again and again.

Dropping Howl, the boy leapt up and ran away. Pooka clung to a handful of his hair, bouncing wildly on the boy's shoulder and buzzing with all his might. On impulse, he sawed through the strands with his blade rather than let go. Then he flitted to the ground and ran back to Howl's side.

His companion sat there, massaging a knot on the side of his head. "Why'd you do that? It was close — he nearly caught me!"

"He saw you," Pooka said.

"Did not! He heard your stupid whistle and caught that flash of glamour, didn't he?"

Pooka held out his hand, hauling Howl to his feet. "He hit you with the stick after you fell off the branch. Once he spotted you, he kept sight of you."

"But — "

"And snatched you with that first nab of his too. Quick hands. What're the chances of that?"

Howl wrinkled his brow. The two of them looked over at the boy, who, not so far away, still spun in circles brushing wildly at the back of his head.

"So he's of the blood?" Howl asked. "Related to us?"

"If he's mud-spattered, ratty-haired, and frog-legged, then he must be

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related to you." Pooka plucked a dappled pink foxglove blossom and twirled it on his finger. "Mind you, I'm rather handsome."

Howl scowled, his frown forming a crevice across his face. "His father, you think? There's no father around the farm I've seen."

"Mother, or I've missed my guess." Pooka dropped the blossom and begin twisting the long strands of the hair he'd cut off. "There's no shine about her, but she tends to that tidy hedge of gorse around the house. I can't find a way through it and I've tried more than once. She knows what she's about, that one. Here you go." He tossed one braided loop to Howl.

"What is it?"

"A necklace woven from the boy's hair." He finished the other and draped it over his own head. "A recompense for the tumble you took and a token for good luck."

Howl was wiggling the necklace over his pointy, out-thrust ears when he froze. "Look at that, will you."

The boy stared straight at them. Pooka sank into the brush, followed by Howl. The dirt smelled of slugs and beetles, but not enough to cause complaint. They peeked out over the leaves. The boy was creeping in their direction with a new stick in his hand.

"The nuisance," Howl grumbled, pulling the necklace down tight and crawling backward. "We ought to tell the king."

"Wouldn't you rather stay here and play?" Pooka asked.

But he too had noticed something wrong, vibrations all the way out at the end of a web that had nothing to do with this boy, and he felt a faint need to deliver the news to those who might do something about it, so he shimmied off through the undergrowth after Howl.

No path led where Pooka and Howl went, for the crossing they sought shifted constantly. In time they found it at a spot on the river where freshets of water jetted white over moss-slick rocks.

Having found it, they couldn't bring themselves to cross and sat on the high bank gazing into the twilight. Though it was summer — it was always summer on the other side — autumn tinged the forest leaves, russets and honey-golds and crisp tawny scattered among the green.

"I told you we should come to see the King," Howl said. "Told you there was something wrong."

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Pooka's heart fluttered like a hummingbird at some dry blossom. "Whatever's wrong there, they don't need us to bring the news. They *know*."

"We should go find out," Howl said without enthusiasm.

They sat, hands folded, unmoving. If they waited long enough, Pooka thought, perhaps the leaves would change back.

Horns sounded in the distance.

"Let's hide," Pooka suggested. "Until we see our company."

"I'm all for that," Howl replied, and they tucked into the hollow trunk of a tree. It had the sharp dry smell of squirrels and empty shells, though not enough to be annoying. The horns echoed off the trees, closer and yet closer still, until Pooka and Howl peered from the crack. The riders came over the hills, mounted on horses no bigger than greyhounds, pearly white, sleek and lean. They were clad in silver armor, as radiant and multicolored as the shells of beetles glistening in the liquid Sun. Scarlet and verdant banners hung limp on their long lances, and riderless mounts jostled among them. The Herald, resplendent in his turquoise and orange butterfly-wing surcoat, reined in his horse at the edge of the river and blew a series of notes that made Pooka tremble. The leaves on the trees shivered too. Across the water, a few fell loose, and fluttered to the ground, some slowly, some quick. Then the riders surged past the Herald and crossed the turbulent river, the hooves of their mounts barely splashing on the surface.

The Herald turned his head toward the hollow tree, sniffing. "Who spies on us? These are days when spies may suffer death."

Howl slipped out of the tree at once and bowed so deeply his forelock dragged the ground. "O most gracious and courteous Lord Herald, munificently martial and majestically eloquent voice of the King — "

"On with it," the Herald snapped. "What is your name?"

"A poor and solitary creature like myself requires no name."

"Not so solitary, I think. There's another mouse who shares your hole." His face was grim beneath its mantis carapace as he peered at Pooka's hiding place. "Show yourself!"

Pooka emerged from the crevice, bending slightly at the waist. "It's a good day to be out riding, isn't it?"

"Ah," the Herald said. "Not a mouse, but a toad." He measured the

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passage of the army as it crossed the water. Pooka considered running, but the horse made that impractical.

"Forgive my unpardonable ignorance, my Lord Herald," Howl said. "But from what battle do you come? And what danger is it, that stretches thus into mortal lands?"

"Some things should not be spoken of on this side of the water." He laid his horn across his lap and reached down to Howl. "Come, little neighbor, cross the stream with me and all your questions shall be answered though I do not speak a word."

Howl accepted the hand, climbed up, and straddled the horse's neck. "Is that a riddle, your elevated Lordship?"

"'Tis no riddle, for it has no solution. Come, you too, Master Toad." A star of light glinted in the nicked edge of the Herald's lance. "Hop up behind."

"*Breeeeep*," Pooka croaked, more like a frog than a toad. He took the proffered hand and slid across the rump.

The last of the army flashed past, cheerless and silent, eyes as hard as gems. The trailing riders herded more empty mounts bearing broken, bloodied armor. Then the Herald raised the horn to his lips again, blared one last doleful note, and prodded his mount to close the rear.

Pooka shivered in the cool air above the river and shut his ears against the despondent babble of the voices in the water. When they came to the far shore, the air rippled like pebbles breaking the surface of a still pond as they passed.

He sucked in his breath. The lambent radiance that lit the land beyond the river had always been yellow as butter and as sweet. Something had curdled it, made it sour on his tongue. As the other riders veered away, disappearing like shadows among the trees, the Herald rode straight for the dingle of the King. The branches of the trees that encircled the rim of the vale drooped as if weeping.

"Aiieee!" Howl cried.

"Hush, little neighbor," the Herald said gently.

Pooka tried to lean around the Herald to see the source of Howl's dismay. The horse stopped beneath the white-blossomed hawthorn in the center of the bowl. Its teardrop petals fell in silent profusion at the stirring of the breeze.

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Howl slipped to the ground and dropped to his knees, tearing at his chest, his hair. Pooka dismounted and saw the cause.

The Pale Lady, dressed in mourning green, sat beneath the hawthorn tree. Next to her lay the body of the King, a giant in death, a grassy tumulus of corpse with the scales of his armor slipping off as lichen-covered slabs of stone. He had grown large, larger even than the human proportions he and his Lady held in life. His head was missing. Reddish water trickled from the stump of his neck, staining the rocks with rust as it soaked into the ground.

A small pile of untouched toadstools lay at the Lady's side. Her tail slipped from under her skirts as she stirred. She rearranged herself to sit upon it again. She *was* disturbed, thought Pooka, despite her placid appearance, to let her tail show even for a moment.

The Herald bowed low before her, pretending not to notice the slip. She bid him rise.

"Lord Herald," she said. "Do you bring good company to soothe bad news or bad company to moderate our joy?"

"I bring company by chance for chance did not accompany our purpose. We recovered neither head nor Hallows."

"Did you accomplish nothing?"

"We died, m'Lady. That is nothing enough for those who died."

"But not enough to win the day."

He bowed low again. "There will be many other days to win but death is the final loss, and we are not a people given to finalities. Is it not enough that the Usurper-Thief is sorely wounded?"

"The King did that to his brother ere *he* died, not you."

Pooka tensed at that news. When brother fought brother, everyone suffered. More so when the one was King and the other wished to be.

"Yes," the Herald replied. "But the fact remains that he is injured, high upon his thigh, and all the life may yet leak out of him. If he did not have the stolen Hallows — the Cup and Platter — he'd be dead already."

"If he did not have the Hallowed Lance and Sword, you'd not fear to press your attack unto victory."

The Herald hesitated, drawing his breath before he spoke. "He no longer has the sword. He lost it crossing the lake and it has been passed

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into the safekeeping of a mortal's hands for a time so that it cannot be used against us."

The Lady's frown at this news was loathsome to behold. "But neither can we wield it to our strength."

The Herald did not answer.

"So by what chance do you bring our friends to visit?" She waved her lily-white fingers toward Pooka and Howl. Her hand made the sound of tiny bells as it passed through the air.

"I found them spying on the other side of the ford. I don't think they serve the Usurper-Turncoat" — Howl gasped at the suggestion " — but they have a mortal stink about them."

She stared at Pooka. Her eyes lingered on his throat, making it hard for him to breathe. "Your bravery and sacrifice are noted," she said to the Herald. "We shall continue our conversation later."

"M'Lady," he replied, and thus dismissed, departed. His mount trotted along at his side with canine obedience.

"Most radiant and glorious Lady," sniffled Howl, wiping tears away from reddened eyes, "your splendor is the sole light shining in this hour of our perpetual darkness. Believe not any slander that would place *me* at the side of the Usurper-Killer."

She beckoned him. Invisible chimes stirred at the movement of her hand. She placed one translucent fingernail on the braid of hair where it touched the hollow of his neck. "What's this?"

"What? This?" Howl's hands leapt to cover his throat. "It was a foolish fancy, a simple whim, a mere caprice — a gift from him!" He pointed at Pooka, who shifted from foot to foot. "It's a worthless trifle, taken from some unwitting mortal."

"Not so worthless, nor so mortal," she said. "This comes from one who shares our blood. Will you give it to me, neighbor?"

Pooka glanced off into the trees. Silver armor stippled the viridescent shadows. If he ran, he'd be running out of one trouble into worse.

"Such a pathetic token is not worthy of my Lady's grace," Howl said. He gripped the necklace like an asp as he handed it to her.

She slipped it over her wrist and inhaled sharply.

Pooka's mouth flew open. "If it tickles you, Lady, then you shouldn't wear it."

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"You think that chance alone brought this to me?" she asked, her fingertip stroking the strands.

"No, I think I did."

"And where did the impulse arise to cut off those strands, and what prompted you to visit our domain again after so very long away?"

Pooka clamped his mouth down shut.

"Though truly I knew not what I sought when I reached out beyond our land — " Silver bracelets jangled as she stretched her bare arm. " — I exerted all my power to find and bring some key to unlock the cage of our predicament. And here it is."

"Then your magic failed," Pooka said.

"How's that?"

"Strands of hair form a lock, not a key."

She smiled, chill as an autumn morning. "Nevertheless. The Usurper-Betrayer who did this — " She flicked one finger at the green mound of the king — *ping!* " — is not the first to forsake us for the mortal world."

"No," Pooka admitted. "He's merely the first to take the four sacred Hallows, the head of his brother, and the crown of the kingdom along for the visit."

"Don't talk to the Lady that way!" Howl screamed, knocking Pooka over. He rolled as he hit the ground and landed on his feet, hands fisted.

"Stay!" the Lady commanded. "He speaks the truth, though he dresses it in shabby garb. And truth or lies, I would have no more violence between our folk within the borders of our land until this fratricide has been answered for."

The scent of chamomile invaded the air, stealing Pooka's anger. "That necklace was made by my own hand, Lady, and given for luck's sake. This is unlucky on us all. I ask for its return."

She smiled, as cold as frost. "But you're right. Hair can form nothing else but a locket. Let me bend the locket's hinge and gaze upon the mortal portrait painted within before I return it to you."

Without waiting for his reply, she lifted it from her wrist and held it up to the jaundiced light. With one word, it turned freely, a spinning wheel in her palm. With a second word, it glowed. A third word, and it opened like a tiny window.

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The Pale Lady stared at the scenes inside the shining ring, eyes unblinking, ruby lips agape.

Pooka stepped closer, curling his toes in the brown-tipped clover blossoms. He saw the wild boy, grown up into a man, dressed in warrior's armor and seated at a great round table. He saw the boy-knight rise and leave the table and come to the shore of a lake. He saw the dead King's brother, crown upon his head, in a boat on that fish-thronged lake between two worlds. The boy crossed over the lake to enter the castle where the King's brother and all his traitorous retinue feasted. The Cup sat on the table. The King's own head, resting on the sacred Platter that preserved and sustained its coherent mind and tongue, opened its mouth to speak. Pooka strained forward to hear the King's words —

— and the little window snapped shut.

The Lady sighed and closed her eyes. Pooka blinked moisture into his own.

"He's the one, isn't he," Howl said, crowded in at Pooka's shoulder, and Pooka knew he meant the lad. "As one of us, he can reach the castle. As a mortal, he can break the spell and heal the Usurper-Knave."

She smiled, opaque as ice. "Perhaps." She offered him the braid of hair. "Here is your trifle."

"I don't want it," Howl blurted. He crossed his arms and scrunched his shoulders.

She turned her eyes on Pooka. "I'll happily trade it for yours, my diminutive Lord."

"No," he muttered and took a step back. He didn't like what he saw coming. "Mine's much nicer. Think I'll keep it."

"You must bring me the boy," she said, and spoke the word of geas. It was binding, as if she'd fastened a silver chain about their ankles.

Somewhere among the stones on the mound of the dead king, a single cricket chirped its lonely dirge.

The mortal Sun hid behind a vast gray canopy of clouds as the green tongues of the trees whispered to one another in the searching wind. The air was redolent with the scent of rain.

"She only called me 'neighbor,'" Howl sniffed. "She called you 'Lord' — and you were rude to her!"

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"Meaningless flattery," Pooka replied.

"How can you say that? She's the Lady of our King."

"Noble is as noble does. Mortals set out saucers of fresh cream for me, no matter what they call me. She called me 'Lord' but didn't offer me a single toadstool."

Howl swallowed wistfully. "And she wasn't eating them either. I can still smell them." He sighed, lifting his head. "Are you sure he's the same boy? That we saw at the farmhouse and in the woods? He looks so much bigger."

"Time passes that way in the other country. And mortal lives pass that way here. Another reason not to trample on them — they're gone so quickly as it is."

"We have to catch him though, when he comes this way, and take him to the Lady."

Pooka grunted. "You do what you want, but I'm not going to help," he said, but as he said it, the invisible chain tugged tight against his ankle.

Something crashed through the brush above them on the hillside. Reddish-brown flashed between the black-brown trunks and two large does burst into view. The boy dashed after them, keeping pace, leaping to one side and then the other, slapping their hindquarters with his bare palms, driving them.

Howl hopped on a branch and trilled stridently like a wren — if the wren were the size of a chicken and had a bad throat cold, Pooka thought, peeking from the bushes. But it caught the boy's attention. He dug his heels into the moldered leaves as the deer bounded off through the trees and disappeared. He stared at the branch, but didn't seem to see Howl. His hand was cocked to throw, but empty.

Howl whistled again, cleared his throat, and shimmered into visibility. "Hello."

The boy retreated. "Are you bird or devil?"

"Neither," Howl replied. "But I would be your friend."

"That's what the spider told the fly," Pooka murmured, rubbing hard where the chain of geas felt the weakest. He wasn't going to be bound if he could help it.

The boy straightened. "Mother says that I must never hurt the birds, for God sees even one sparrow fall. But she says that if I see a devil, I must

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flee from it. Are you a bird or a devil," he paused, leaning forward, trying to peer through the veil of glamour. "Or are you a boy like me?"

Howl nodded enthusiastically. "I'm a boy like you."

The wild boy traced fingertips over his bare chin. "You're very hairy for a boy."

"Not to mention ugly," Pooka muttered.

Howl jutted out his curly beard. "Where I come from, all the children have beards."

"Really?" asked the boy. "Do they get them from their fathers?"

"Yes," Howl said. "Everyone has one."

"Beards or fathers?"

"Both. You could have one of each if you wished. Would you like to go see?"

The boy stepped forward, eagerness and hope written clearly on his face. There was such a loneliness in the sharp, intense eyes, just waiting to be filled. The wind gusted, shaking the trees as the boy willingly followed Howl.

Pooka popped out of the bushes. "Boo! Go away!"

The boy jumped. "Who're you?"

"He's trouble," Howl said.

"I'm a devil!" Pooka growled as fiercely as he could. He thought that maybe devils were some kind of large and dangerous bird, so he clawed his hands and flashed glamour at the fingertips to make them look like talons. "Now scat! Run away! Run for your life!"

"He's just playing games," Howl sneered. "Ignore him. We all do."

The mortal boy looked at Pooka, glanced at Howl, looked at Pooka some more, and then laughed. "I like games but it's boring playing them by myself. You're a funny boy."

Pooka kicked the boy in the shin. "Do you think that's funny? Run!"

"Hey!" The boy bent over to rub his leg.

The trees shook furiously in the wind. A drop of water fell out of the sky and landed splat on Pooka's pointed nose. Then another fell. They all looked up.

"If we go where the other children are," Howl cried above the din, "we shall all stay dry!"

The boy opened his mouth to answer.

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Pooka hammered his toe into the boy's shin again. "You're a snail in a pail and you can't catch me," he taunted, and took off running in the direction of the farm where the boy lived.

Big fat raindrops falling sideways spattered him as he ran. He looked over his shoulder and saw the boy right beside him.

"You're not very fast," the lad said, grinning.

So Pooka tripped him. The boy stumbled, but kept his feet. Pooka shifted direction and ran downhill to pick up speed. The important thing was to get him away from Howl and keep him away from the Lady.

The wind whistled up a pitch, stripping the branches. The lacerated leaves swirled around Pooka like so many fingers. He glanced over his shoulder and the boy was right behind, the tip of his tongue poking from the corner of his mouth as he lunged with his hand outstretched.

"I'm going to catch you!"

"Not like that, you won't," Pooka said, but he barely evaded the boy's grasp by swinging from a low-slung branch and landing on a fallen tree. "Turtle on a log, head in the fog, that's you."

He turned, his soles gripping the rough bark as he ran the length of the trunk and jumped off the end. The boy vaulted the barrier and kept after him.

Thunder crashed and rain fell in a deluge. It became impossible to see more than a few yards forward or back, the rest of the world cut off by a curtain of threaded raindrops. The slope turned to mud beneath their feet, rivulets carrying away the soil before they could stand on it. The wind off the hilltop buffeted them sideways two steps for every one they took forward.

A fear seized Pooka more strongly than the wind — the boy might actually catch him. For though the rain fell hard enough to sting, the boy did not relent. Pooka, who had never been caught by a mortal and who had no desire to satisfy anyone's wishes but his own, concentrated only on escape.

The wind surged again. Branches cracked and fell from the trees on either side of them. The air sizzled as if on fire, and then lightning flashed, striking a giant tree in front of them. A great gust of wind blew at the same time, knocking it over. Its roots ripped free of the sodden ground with a massive, sucking *pop*, spraying wet clumps of dirt and

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pebbles everywhere. Seeing his chance, Pooka grasped a sundered root and rode it into the air as the tree tilted over and fell. Then he ran along the trunk as it fell shuddering into place. He didn't notice the river gushing beneath him until he was more than halfway across, and then he screeched and leapt at once —

— and fell, soaked to the bone, covered in mud, into a dry land of summer under a sky as yellow as the contents of a chamber pot and as sour to the tongue. He spit, noticing the harshness of the noise in the sudden silence.

The Herald stood there, wearing a turquoise and mallow-blossom-colored cape. Parts of it were faded, like dust knocked off a butterfly's wing. One arm was bound up in a sling. He'd been in another battle.

"Do not feel bad, Toad," the Herald said. "The Lady always receives what she desires."

"Yes," Pooka mumbled. He felt the invisible cuff of geas unlatch and fall away from his ankle, fulfilled. "May she desire warts."

A surprised grunt preceded the boy as he splashed out of nothingness trailed by mist and landed on the grassy bank. He crouched down low and gazed all around, confused.

The Herald bowed to the boy. "Welcome, O Ephemera of Most Everlasting Importance. Shall we go see the Lady of the Dingle? She awaits us."

He extended the sharp plane of his hand like an arrow. It pointed through the gray forest toward the hollow at the heart of the country.

THE WHITE BLOSSOMS had all fallen from the hawthorn tree. It was covered with stunted, shriveled fruit suspended in some state that might never ripen into seed.

A carpet of woolly thyme blanketed the King's mound. Pale blue forget-me-nots, their washed-out blossoms frayed around the edges, formed a sash across the hummock's waist. The moss-covered stones had weathered some, sinking into the soil. Between the mound and the tree, the Lady rested, her emerald garb deepened into a dark and stony jade shot through with near-black veins. Piles of toadstools lay heaped around her, all untouched, some so old they had decayed. She still was not well. But Pooka had no appetite either.

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"Welcome," she said to the boy. "Your mother is a dear cousin of mine and so I bid you welcome. Will you have a seat upon our humble sward?"

She waved her hand in a single graceful arc that sounded like fingers strumming a harp's strings. The boy started at the noise, but sat down. "You look a bit like my mother," he said.

Pooka lifted his chin. "So how's the Usurper-Victor doing these days?"

The Lady's smile froze for a brief second. "I have not overlooked you, my most inquisitive, acquisitive little Lordling. The Unctuous-Usurper bleeds with an unsalvable wound. His retinue drowns their despair in preemptive feasts of false celebration. Come!" She patted her hand on the ground beside her — taps on a cymbal. "Sit beside us and advise us."

Pooka plopped down beside the boy and crossed his legs. "I'm comfy here."

She arched her eyebrows, then looked through him as if he no longer existed and turned all her attention to the boy. "I say welcome again, my young cousin and most perceptive Lord. It is past time we met, although it is perhaps not yet too late. Will you tell me your name?"

"Don't do it!" Pooka shouted. "Or, if you do, first offer to trade your name for hers. Then you'll have equal power over her."

"Hush," the Lady smiled. "My little neighbor has a mouth whose capacity far exceeds the size of his simple brain. Some things that fall out of it belong at the other end of the tunnel that passes through him."

The boy looked at both of them, puzzled. "But if you know my mother, then you know that she gave me no name. She says that I am better off without one."

Pooka laughed. She did know what she was about, that one. He started to have hope for the boy after all.

"Then we shall follow the guidance of your little counselor," the Lady said, "and offer things besides our names to one another in trade. Do you wish to play?"

The Herald returned — though Pooka had not noticed him leave — bearing a tray that contained a loaf of fresh bread. The aroma drifting from it smelled of wheatfields and honey. A small pitcher rested beside it, and though Pooka could not see the fluid inside, the scent of wild blackberries nearly made him dizzy.

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"Thank you, but no," the Lady said, smiling up at the Herald. "I find no appetite within."

"I'm hungry!" the boy cried.

"Don't take it." Pooka thrust out his hand. "Don't even take one bite."

"Be silent!" the Lady said. "My buzzing pipsqueak of a distant relative is far too big for his breeches, and should consider pulling the waistband up over his head until he can grow into them. In the meantime, pay no more attention to his noise than you would any other sound from the seat of someone's pants. May I offer you food or drink?"

The boy licked his lips, his eyes quickly calculating the size of his hunger and the worth of the loaf. "Give me half. Mother says it's never polite to take more than half."

She broke the bread — a bell sounded, a deep toll that hung in the air — and handed half the loaf to him. He broke a morsel off with his fingers, sighing as he swallowed.

"In exchange for half a loaf of bread," the Lady closed her hand in the air and the bell stopped, "I'll take half your wit."

"Oh, fool!" Pooka cried. He stared into the boy's eyes and saw them dull by half, shining water eclipsed by thick clouds. The boy shook his head, like someone chasing away an insect, then shoved the rest of the bread into his mouth. Crumbs spilled out the sides as he chewed.

"A fair deal for fairy bread bestowed upon a mortal," the Lady said. "My dear cousin's dearer child, is there anything else your heart desires?"

"Yes," the boy answered, crumbs on his cheek.

"Be careful," Pooka warned. "Ask only for — "

"Be quiet, my pestilential and profligate unwelcome acquaintance!"

"I want...I want...." The boy couldn't find the words, wrinkling his forehead in dismay. He made a throwing motion with his hand.

"You want true aim?"

"Yes! It's...*fun*. I like it."

"So be it," the Lady said. She curved her hand in the air around an invisible spear — a sound shot through it like a distant trumpet when she cast. "Your missiles shall never miss their bull's-eye. But in exchange, all your choices shall fly wide of their intended targets."

The Herald smiled and murmured, "Yes, let the Usurper-Beggar beg for the boy's aid now."

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A bee's stinger of pain lodged in Pooka's heart. "Let him choose to help you; that would be fair reward for a fairy gift."

She folded her hands on her lap, ignoring Pooka. The pale flesh of her bosom trembled lightly like milk in a bucket. "Is there anything else you'd like to have?" she asked the boy. "Some third request?"

She shifted as she awaited his answer. The folds of her dress rippled beneath her.

Pooka leaned over and whispered in the boy's ear. The boy nodded. "Lady," he started, just as Pooka had told him. "Your tail is showing! How do you come to have a cow's tail?"

"No, no — " Pooka said.

One hand clutched the cloth at her bosom, while the other swept the tail out of sight — the cacophonous clangor of a shelf full of pans as it collapsed.

" — no! You were supposed to say *'your garter's showing'* so she'd owe you a favor. Ach!" Pooka buried his face in his palms.

"Get out of here, get out of my sight!" the Lady hissed, humiliated and enraged. Pooka's ears twitched and he looked up. The Herald bent to soothe her but she smacked the tray, spilling the pitcher. "You take that dead scrap of animated flesh, and that miserable, ill-mannered, buck-toothed, scabrous rat — "

Pooka didn't wait for her to finish. He grabbed the boy's hand and dragged him to his feet. "She dismissed us — run for the river, faster than you've ever run before!"

They ran. Before they surmounted the lip of the dingle, a tocsin sounded behind them, hackling the hairs on Pooka's back. The shades of warriors descended from the trees and hurried toward the vale in answer to the summons.

"This way," Pooka shouted.

He heard the sound of water over rocks before he burst from the edge of the forest with the boy behind him. The top of the tree-bridge still emerged from a fog that blanketed the river. He pushed the boy ahead first, turning to see how much time they had.

Not much. Lance-bearing warriors, some already in armor, stepped out from between the trees. The horns sounded again.

The boy climbed the tree, passed through the veil of mist, and

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disappeared. Pooka mounted the branches more nimbly, pausing when he reached the top. The horns fell silent.

"Halt, you dirt-grubbing, hole-dwelling, curd-licking — "

The Lady herself strode forward, the Herald at her side. Pooka cupped his hands to his mouth.

"*Mooooooo!*"

Her face froze, speechless before she could speak a word of binding. Pooka turned and plunged after the boy.

The pale light transmuted to sudden gray darkness, warmth dissolved in wetness, and the silence relented to the keening wind, while raindrops pounded on the drumheads of a million leaves. The flooding river thrust against the fallen tree, splashing over it, rocking it violently from side to side. Pooka gripped the branches like handles to balance himself as he stepped fitfully toward the other side. When he reached the middle of the tree-bridge, something roared upstream. A muddy, churning, foam-flecked wall of water charged down between the riverbanks. Pooka had just one second to leap for the mortal shore.

He was caught by the boy's outstretched hand and dragged to the high bank as the flood-surge ripped the tree away behind him.

THEY FOUND HOWL searching for them and they all took shelter in a mostly damp spot under an overhanging ledge of rock. It smelled of muddy decay and green things drowning, enough to make you sad if you granted it too much attention.

The boy told Howl everything that had happened. Pooka picked the caked mud off his arms and legs. He winced as clumps of hair came off with it. Meanwhile, the rain stopped, the sky cleared, and a seemingly source-less saffron light illuminated the land.

"But you were scarcely gone at all," Howl said.

Pooka held his hands open. "Things are like that when you travel to the other country."

"We won't be allowed back, will we?" Howl asked, and Pooka shook his head. "What do you think will happen?"

"I don't know."

They sat there as water dripped from the branches and the ledge above

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them until the world passed into darkness. The boy looked up and pointed at the first star shining in the sky. "I better be going home. Mother will be growing worried." Then he sighed. "Can I come play again tomorrow? It's been very fun having other children to talk to and play with."

"Yes," Howl assured him. "We'll go back to see the Lady — "

Pooka grabbed the star's twinkle and patted it into a walnut-sized sphere of glamour. Then he took the braid of hair from around his neck and tied up the ball in a bow. He held it out for the boy. "Here's a gift for you."

The boy's eyes regained some of their luster. "Oh, thank you!"

Pooka pulled it back again. "But, you mustn't unwrap it until you are in sight of your home. Will you promise?"

"Yes," the boy answered solemnly.

Pooka handed it to him. "You'd better run. We'll see you tomorrow."

"Farewell." The lad jogged off smiling. He disappeared from sight, and there was only the sound of his feet slapping the mud, then even that was gone.

"What did you give him?" Howl asked.

"Forgetfulness," Pooka said. He could see the future clearly, the wild boy growing up now to serve a human king for his brief blossoming of years as the seelie kingdom sickened and failed. But so be it. "He won't remember meeting the Lady, what he gained or lost, or anything else that happened to him today."

Howl crouched forward, elbows on knees, bearded chin on his knuckles. He could see that future too. "Do you have any forgetfulness left to spare for me?"

"Alas." Pooka sighed. "I've given it all away."

The knight skirted the heavy grove of trees, pressed through the thicket, and paused at the hilltop, his head cocked alertly. His eye passed over Pooka and Howl as they ran along the branches of the tree, then snapped back to them again.

"That's not the same wild boy," Howl said. "Is it?"

"He's changed," Pooka whispered. "But it's him — he's seen us."

"I beseech you," the knight said, "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to help me find my way."

"In the name of who?" Howl muttered.

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But Pooka seated himself upon a limb. "What is your name, good sir?"

"Percival," he answered proudly, his hand tapping his armored chest. "A knight of the Round Table in the hall at Camelot."

"Ah," Pooka said, a little sadly at the loss implied by such a gain. He pointed down the right hand road. "Follow this trail until you reach a beautiful river, follow the river until you find a man fishing from a boat, and follow that man across the river to his castle to find what you seek."

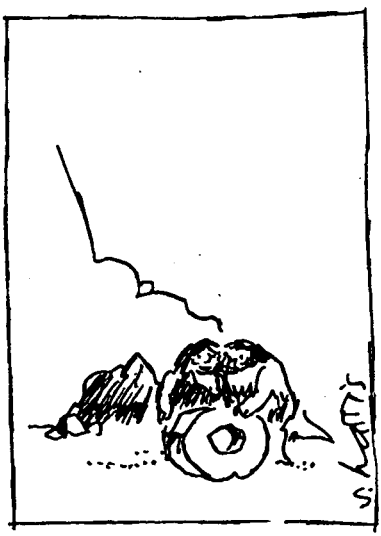
Reaching into his bag, Percival said, "God's blessing fall on you. May I give you a token for your trouble?"

Howl stroked his beard and leaned eagerly forward. But Pooka said, "No, we've taken enough from you already." He sniffed hard, then spun glamour around them to make them disappear.

Percival's startled expression was followed quickly by his hand marking the sign of the cross. A moment later, however, he turned his charger down the right hand path.

A brisk winter wind stirred through the trees as they watched him go. Pooka hugged himself, shivering like someone who did not expect to see another summer.

THE AMERICAN DREAM



THE NEANDERTHAL DREAM

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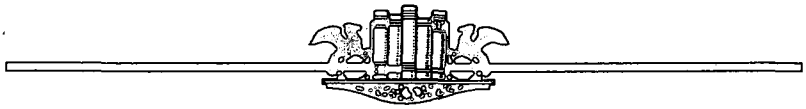

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Conquistador, by S. M. Stirling, Roc, 2003, $23.95.

REGULAR readers of this column have heard me complain in the past about how I feel that high fantasy novels have become nothing much more than war novels, with battalions of orcs and elves in the place of human army divisions, their presence making it a "magical" book.

Nothing wrong with that, of course. I just miss the fantasy field the way it was when I first discovered it in the seventies. There weren't as many books available, true, but they were all different. When you started a book, you had *no idea* where it would take you. What you did know was that it would be someplace you hadn't been before.

This was helped, perhaps, by the fact that there weren't as many contemporary authors writing fantasy, so to fill their lines, publishers went back and ransacked the vast library of books published earlier, before there were genre designations. It's probably not so hard to have a varied line when you have a century or so of work to draw on. But I digress.

The same was true of hard sf, which these days seems to be mostly nonexistent — that is, when it hasn't been hijacked by near-future thrillers or is really space opera in disguise. There's nothing wrong with either of those subgenres either, but what I miss is the thoughtful speculation that went into those hard sf books — the real science.

(Now before any of you write in, I know that I'm generalizing above. There *are* exceptions, of course. But they're tough to track down as they seem to get lost in the waves of new releases that are published each year.)

But there's one subgenre that seems capable of delivering both the sense of wonder I enjoyed in

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high fantasy and the hard facts speculation of sf, and that's the alternate history. Or at least it's certainly delivered in the book we're about to discuss.

Conquistador begins in the Bay Area of California in 1946 when World War II vet John Rolfe is trying to set up a short-wave radio and inadvertently opens up a portal to an alternate America where the Europeans never arrived.

After that introduction, the story jumps ahead almost sixty years and is told mostly from the viewpoint of a Department of Fish and Game warden named Tom Christiansen in FirstSide (our world) who is investigating the strange appearance of the impossible (such as a live condor that has no genetic relative on record, nor shows any sign of pollution in its body), and Adrienne Wolfe, the granddaughter of John Rolfe and a security agent on the other side of the portal who has come over to FirstSide to investigate the smuggling of those same impossibilities and, hopefully, put a stop to the threat they represent in revealing the existence of the world beyond the portal.

Naturally, the two meet, and, after some miscommunication and misunderstandings, end up working together to combat the problem. From an action point of view, *Conquistador* has plenty to offer from start to finish. Stirling also does a good job with his characters, presenting us with a varied cast.

But where does the sense of wonder and sf speculation come in?

Well, the sense of wonder is in the loving way the world on the other side of the portal is described. And the speculation is in how that world came to be — both in its virgin state when discovered by John Rolfe (there is some wonderful world history slipped in at various times to explain this), and its development subsequent to Rolfe's discovery. Stirling's descriptions offer a wealth of detail, but that detail never bogs down the story, which is a nice trick if you can pull it off the way he does.

If I have any complaints, they're philosophical. One is how the love that Rolfe and the other settlers have for the new land is based, in a large part, in how it's become their private game reserve. I suppose not being a hunter, and not seeing the sport in killing other creatures for fun, I find it difficult to sympathize with that kind of an outlook.

Another is the fascist makeup of many of the settlers: many of them are Boers from South Africa

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or German war criminals and the like, racists looking for a new homeland. It's explained why they were accepted (they were the people with nothing to lose in leaving our world, and no one would come looking for them), and it's noted and commented upon by some of the characters as well, but I still found it hard to sympathize with the more open-minded characters like Rolfe, simply because he chose to work with such people.

It would also have been nice to have had a larger presence of the peoples native to the continent, but unfortunately they get the same short shrift here as they did in our world, though mostly their loss of life in the world Rolfe discovered was through the inadvertent spread of disease. The two Native characters we do get to know a little aren't on stage enough—well, not enough for this reader.

But none of the above spoiled my complete fascination with the world created by Stirling, because it's our world, if only....

And, as I mentioned earlier, there's a first-class action plot happening here, as well; one that will have you turning pages at a quicker and quicker rate, all the way up to the appendices at the end of the book.

Hannah's Garden, by Midori Snyder, Viking, 2002, $16.99.

Once upon a time four writers were approached at a World Fantasy Convention and asked if they'd each write a book about fairies based on the drawings of Brian Froud. They agreed and happily spent an afternoon sitting around a table at the con going through all the drawings, picking the ones they'd like for their book. Surprisingly, there was no argument, each writer getting the drawings that he or she wanted. And then off each of them went to write their book.

In 1994, two of these volumes appeared under the banner "Brian Froud's Faerielands." But after the second one (Patricia A. McKillip's haunting *Something Rich and Strange*), there was a sudden silence on the Faerielands front and the final two books were never published. At least, not as part of the series.

In 1996, Tor Books released *The Wood Wife*, by Terri Windling, which should have been the third Faerielands book, and now, finally, Viking has published the final volume, *Hannah's Garden* by Midori Snyder. Both books are probably different from how they would have appeared under the Faerielands banner. Certainly, they're missing

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Froud's wonderful art. But the spirit of those drawings lives on in them, and although, for whatever reason, they weren't published as part of the Froud series, I'm happy that they are now available.

The Wood Wife remains one of my all-time favorite novels, and Snyder's new book edges right up there on a nearby shelf. *Hannah's Garden* is one of those books that makes you feel at home from the first page. As soon as you're introduced to them, you *know* and care about these characters: teenage violinist Cassie Brittman and her somewhat flighty mother Anne; Cassie's grandfather Daniel, a reclusive artist who is dying in hospital; the mysterious gray-haired fiddler who might be simply a man, or who might be a figure out of one of Daniel Brittman's paintings.

When Cassie and Anne, with Anne's most recent boyfriend in tow, head north from the university town of Rose Bay, they're expecting to deal with the heartbreak of having a loved one in the hospital. They don't expect to find his house overrun with vegetation and wild animals, as though it's been abandoned for years. Or that someone has been driving a truck through Grandmother Hannah's beloved garden as though it was a racetrack. Or that they'd get caught up between two warring factions of faerie, each demanding a sacrifice from the Brittman family.

The weight of it all falls on Cassie's young shoulders. She's already been more mother than daughter to Anne for all these years, and this becomes one more case of her having to take charge. Except this time, she has no idea what to do or whom to trust. If she doesn't make the right decision, not only her grandfather's life but her own and Anne's may be forfeit.

Snyder's prose is a sensual feast. She as readily brings to life an Irish music session or a hospital ward as she does the natural world around the family farm and Daniel Brittman's rich art. Her pacing is quick but never hurried. Her characters are so well drawn that we can feel the story inside their skin. And while she can write a dramatic scene with as much punch as anyone, she also has a gift for those that are quieter, or strange and mysterious.

This is a treasure of a book.

Something's at My Elbow, by Kathleen Burns, Xlibris Corporation, 2000, $20.99.

Here's one for the tween in your household, a sweet story of a young

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girl whose beloved aunt, staying overnight for a visit, mysteriously disappears sometime between the evening meal and morning. Eliza-Bridget is heartbroken about the loss of her aunt until she meets Kiba, a little fairy-like creature who has the magic to reduce Eliza-Bridget to her own diminutive size.

The two have a grand time exploring the vineyard and fields around Eliza-Bridget's house, enough so that while Eliza-Bridget doesn't forget her aunt, her sadness is no longer as immediate as it once was. But then one day, Eliza-Bridget's autistic sister Mouse (so called because she always sits quiet as a...) disappears as well and Eliza-Bridget has to make a decision that will change her life forever.

Something's at My Elbow is written with a guileless charm. It won't necessarily appeal to everyone (adult readers might not appreciate the fact that Kiba only speaks in rhymes), but it's a wonderful and fresh little story with a lot of heart, and deserves a wider readership than it's probably getting in its current edition.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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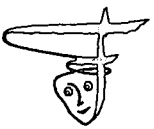

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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

My Week as a PoD Person

I've spent a lot of time — too much, really — reading unpublished (and unpublishable) writing. Unsolicited submissions. Slush. If you want to get into publishing, that's usually the price you have to pay.

Until recently, people like me — editors and their assistants — were the only ones who saw this stuff. If we didn't like it, it didn't get published — unless the authors paid to publish it themselves, either alone or through a subsidy publisher such as Vantage Press, and those costs were high enough to scare away most aspiring authors.

Over the past decade, however, advances in digital printing technologies have brought the costs of publication down and paved the way for thousands of frustrated writers to get their work into print. With "print-on-demand" (PoD) technology, subsidy publishers can charge authors much less for their services — which means many more customers can afford them. Robert D. Reed Publishers of San Francisco and 1stBooks Library of Bloomington, Indiana have, in the space of just a few years, turned subsidy publishing into a relatively big business. 1stBooks alone has printed one million copies of its 14,000 titles.

The costs have gotten so low that some new publishing companies skip the subsidy model altogether. PoD lets them pay authors a small royalty on copies sold, just like traditional commercial publishers. The new technology has encouraged some writers to form small publishing companies of their own as well, and the rise of on-line booksellers such as Amazon.com and bn.com has even opened a viable sales channel for these DIY operations — some of their titles have sold thousands of copies. There's no doubt that it's cheaper and easier to publish a book now than it has ever been in the history of the world.

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It should be no surprise that this thriving "indie" publishing scene fosters a vigorously iconoclastic mythology. "1st Books Library has made a conscious decision to offer its services to everyone, rather than give control to an elite clique of editors and agents," says their web site. Who needs editors? PoD opens the doors to all comers, and there's no one waiting to red-pencil your precious prose. "1stBooks Library does not make value judgments about the literary merit of books, nor edits manuscripts for style or content," says the site. "The author decides what the public reads, and the public decides if it makes good reading or not."

Indie publishers point to the unquestionable success of books like *The Celestine Prophecy* (originally published and marketed by the author himself), but there hasn't been a comparable success in the sf and fantasy world, at least not yet. It's certainly true that some potentially marketable books go begging with commercial publishers. Frank Herbert couldn't give *Dune* away before Chilton — a publisher of auto price guides — took a chance on it. But the conspiracy theory of rejection holds no water. Commercial publishers are eager to find good new work, and the ranks of rejected submissions do not support the notion that the world is full of talented new authors who just can't get a break.

Still, there's some appeal to the egalitarian ethos of indie publishing. There are undoubtedly many worthy books that don't find a commercial publisher simply for financial reasons: It's hard to imagine them selling sufficient copies to cover a traditional publisher's costs. If the indie publishers are living up to their self-proclaimed potential, then we should see some of these otherwise unpublishable gems making their way to market.

Is that happening? Or has PoD technology done nothing but make slush — bound and priced like the wares of traditional publishers — available to the unsuspecting public? To find out, I took a week and spent it with a couple dozen PoD titles recently submitted for review.

Day 1: Wading In

I've got piles of books in front of me, and even a glance tells me I'm in an unfamiliar country, a netherworld that lies between the rawness of unpublished manuscript and professionally published books as I know them. All of these are clearly books, typeset pages bound

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between covers. But I've seen galleys — uncorrected advance proofs — that look better than many of these. And it's not just the generally rotten cover art (though that is, often, simply dreadful). Judging from these examples, PoD hasn't entirely risen beyond its fold-and-staple roots. The cover lamination seems too thick or glossy somehow: The spines aren't straight. One of these is cut so crudely that the title and back cover copy are nearly truncated. At their best, as examples of the printing arts, these indie products approach the lower end of commercially published books.

A lot of it has to do with clumsy design. The one-word title on the cover of *Snugglarea* is rendered in no fewer than seven incompatible type faces. And the titles rarely inspire confidence. *Slog*? Not the feeling you want when opening a new book. *The Interstellar Undertakers* sounds like some justly forgotten entry in *Thrilling Wonder Stories*. *Space Ark*? Is that another Gene Roddenberry project? Some amateur charm is to be expected, but thus far the emphasis is squarely on amateur.

On the other hand, most of these have been printed on good-quality paper, and the hardcover bindings (most are paper) feel tight and solid. Too many commercial publishers have been using cheap acidic papers in recent years — for hardbound books, no less. If indies can use better stuff, maybe the dinosaurs are on the way out.

Day 2: Frights of Fantasy

Maybe I'm starting with this one because I want to know how bad I can expect it to get. *The Thoughtmaster's Conduit* by Kerry Orchard (New Concepts Publishing, 2001, 280 pages, $6.49, *www.newconceptspublishing.com*) is the most clumsily produced of the lot, and the text is no better. I didn't come to the PoD world just to bash everything I found, but Orchard's fractured prose strains my best intentions. The point of view changes three times on the first page, and the tense shifts in mid-paragraph without any discernible intent. "He cried out miserably at the anguish of his reality." That's not prose to convince anyone that the commercial publishers are snootily ignoring good new writers.

Fantasy of the traditional sort — the "epic" or "quest" type — remains one of the staples of commercial publishers' lists, so it's no surprise to find fully a third of the sf and fantasy indie titles fall into that category. *Thoughtmaster* is one example, but I don't want to

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judge such a populous region by a single inhabitant encountered at random. Unfortunately, Josiah Lebowitz's *Guardian of the Stone: Book One of The Verities Silex* (1stBooks Library, 2002, 385 pages, $11.50, *www.1stbooks.com*) is no improvement. Lebowitz pairs nouns and adjectives as if he's Noah loading the Ark: And they shall enter two by two. "The setting sun cast its golden rays upon the rippling lake. A cool breeze blew across the tranquil waters...." The dialogue is wildly unlikely, and he's rather too fond of ellipses.

The author's note mentions that Lebowitz is "heavily influenced" by "Japanese RPGs, and anime," and the impact of these sources comes through too clearly. The story unfolds like a computer game: Disaster strikes the hero's home village and he wanders the forest bemoaning his fate, when suddenly a hideous monster ("razor sharp talons ...needle-like teeth") leaps at him out of the brush. He slays it with "a brilliant white ray" of magical energy. Fourteen more of the monsters follow, and he slays them all. Then he hears a woman's scream, and rushes deeper into the woods to find her battling a troll. He draws his sword.... You get the picture.

In company of this caliber, *AErin of Grendelire, or, the Wizard's Wife* by Becky Gauger (1stBooks Library, 2002, 377 pages, $14.50, *www.1stbooks.com*) falls like rain after a month of drought. There's the hint of a functional story — it's not the kind of thing I'd pick up, but it has the elements of a narrative, and the prose doesn't clank like cast-iron cookware. The problems of *The Wizard's Wife* lie principally in mechanics and tone. Gauger doesn't know when to show and when to tell, and she often undermines her own best instincts. She starts with a reasonably intriguing line: "They'd burned everything." But then she gets too caught up in digressions, so that she quickly loses the interest she'd earned. And when Gauger brings her opening chapter to what might have been a solid conclusion, she tacks on another scene that spoils the dramatic rhythm.

These are the kinds of difficulties that a workshop — or even some how-to writer's manuals — might have solved. The tone problem is trickier, because it seems intentional. Gauger's trying for a breezy feel that just doesn't suit her material. Marela, rescued by the kindly wizard AErin, struggles to adjust to his magical ways: "A creepy feeling squiggled up her spine. Okay, so he'd disappeared. It was no big deal, she argued with

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herself." Squiggled? No big deal? This might work if Gauger were playing this for laughs, but she's not.

It's hard to tell what Gauger is after in *The Wizard's Wife*. It begins as the sorrowful story of a girl who may be cursed — everyone around her seems to die before their time. Then she's saved by AErin, and the narrative gets this silly sprightly feel. Before long, that shifts into the heavy-breathing prose of a Harlequin novel, when the elderly AErin turns out not to be so geriatric after all: "Her eyes followed the path of the water as it played among his chest curls then flowed down over a hard belly and strong thighs." Gauger can't seem to decide what kind of story she wants to tell — it shifts shape with every other chapter.

Day 3: Is There an Editor in the House?

Exile to the Stars by Dale B. Mattheis (Ardent Publishing, 2001 copyright, pub date 12/2002, 535 pages, $27.95, *www.ardentpublishing.com*) comes closest of all these indie books to looking and feeling like a professional job — on the outside. I've seen significantly worse cover art and design on commercial sf and fantasy. This one wouldn't look out of place on a shelf at your local bookstore.

The map is the first sure sign that we're still in indie land. It's the kind of thing an author might give to an artist to render — a rough hand sketch, not a finished work. Bound solidly between hard covers, it's almost embarrassing.

That's a shame because, at least in the early going, the text demonstrates that Mattheis is not without ability. He starts us off in 2025 with a familiar dystopic vision of rampant urban decay, yawning chasms of economic inequality, virtual sex, and prosthetic body modification. It's nothing new, but he does a reasonable job with it. He shows a decent ear for dialogue, and his future slang isn't always wince-worthy.

But Mattheis loses his edge very quickly. Fencing has somehow risen to pop-cultural prominence in this future, and duels, while illegal, are not uncommon. Our hero, Jeff Friedrick, is an ace with the saber, which will prove vital once he's transported to the medievalish world of Aketti. Though it takes only a few pages, the transition from the mean streets to the fencing club inexplicably robs Mattheis of all his skill with dialogue. Now his characters speak like a Civil War reenactment crew — "'Hathwaite,

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you've seen fit to make statements that question my courage. Mr. Jorgenson has fully related their content, and I find them offensive'" — when they aren't sounding like a beer commercial — "'It's time to kick ass.'" And what are we supposed to make of expressions like "Glory be" or "Holy simoleons"?

Nevertheless, there's still something occasionally compelling in *Exile to the Stars* — a glimmer which suggests that, with a lot of practice and guidance, Mattheis might be able to craft a decent adventure story. What he needs is an editor. The indie world might view editors as an elitist cabal set to guard the gates of publishing, but a book like *Exile* reminds us that editors do a lot more than filter out the dross. They help develop writers — and help writers develop their work into professional, publishable form. There's not much an editor could do with *Thoughtmaster*, but a skillful (and patient) hand might guide Mattheis in focusing his story, avoiding distracting digressions, evening the tone, and maintaining the snap in his dialogue. *Exile* is never going to match Tolkien, but — with a lot of work — it could match, say, Terry Goodkind.

* * *

Interlude: The Voyeur Camera

It's television's fault. Television and movies. Visual media. In so many of these indie publications the narrative point of view slides around like a hot rock on ice, and observations intrude without any clear viewpoint at all. Consider this, from *Thoughtmaster*: "a skeletal face ...whose shifting features left the viewer confused." What viewer? Or this: "The voice was surprisingly strong from such a diaphanous figure." Surprising to whom? Surely not to the only other person in the scene, who knows the speaker well.

These writers' imaginations have been shaped by visual storytelling, in which there's always an implied viewpoint — that of the audience, the camera, the peeping lens. They conceive their scenes as if they're presented on a screen, and when they commit their prose, the camera remains, lurking outside the frame.

There's no other explanation for scene shifts like those in *Exile*. As Jeff Friedrick and his pal Carl leave the bar where they've met, we're told: "At the bar, a man turned his head and watched them go. He was tall, and a brief flare of light revealed reddish hair. Before the spotlight moved on, odd points of light deep in green eyes gave the

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impression of motion...." Gave the impression to whom? The viewing protocols of film and television help us make sense of it: The two men who have been the focus of the scene get up and head for the door, and the camera pans aside to settle on this watcher. His reddish hair is "revealed" to us, the audience. We're the ones who receive the "impression of motion." It's as if, in these moments, the authors are not crafting prose but working out a screenplay. I recall the oldest and most basic advice offered to the aspiring writer: Read! Read! And read some more! If you want to write a novel, don't draw your skills from the big — or the small — screen.

Day 4: Almost

I didn't expect anything better out of *Slog* by Richard Bellush, Jr. (Robert D. Reed Publishers, 2002, 239 pages, $24.95, *www.rdrpublishers.com*). It's as well-made as *Exile*, and the interior design is actually superior, but the cartoonish cover art suggests that we've dropped a notch or two.

Chalk one up for the old saw about a book and its cover.

Slog is a big improvement over *Exile*. Ignore the regrettable title, forge on through a shaky start, and it turns out there's an engagingly oddball story, some good tight writing, and an author whose competence and control actually get stronger as he goes.

The first and briefest section, "Sweat," introduces us to a global-warming future and a torrid, jungly, overgrown New Jersey. George Custer, one of the scattered survivors of the collapse of civilization, lives a simple scavenger's life in what used to be Morristown, until the sexy, scheming Joelle and the ambitious pirate Ulysses S. Johnston show up to complicate things. The Quebecois have plans to colonize old New York and its surroundings, and George finds himself caught between Joelle and Ulysses as they maneuver for control of the suddenly desirable real estate.

It's not until the second part, "Stars," that Bellush truly finds his feet. The structure is solid, and the writing is as well-crafted as anything I've encountered yet among the indie titles. Save perhaps for Bellush's idiosyncratic placement (and repetition) of adjectives, this paragraph would bring no shame to a professionally published work: "My people. Le Clerc seriously believed that I could somehow launch an army against him. I often have been underestimated, not least by myself. This was the first time I had

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been so seriously overestimated. I didn't like it any better."

There's no pretense to mimetic credibility in *Slog*, and Bellush cranks the colorful absurdity up further in the third and longest part, which the author divides into two sections, "Sand" and "Snow." It's the tale, presented as a trial transcript, of Aeneas Custer, raised as George's son but actually the product of Joelle's liaison with Ulysses. Accused of crimes against humanity, Aeneas defends himself with the story of his life — a lively if unlikely romp involving a paisley dirigible, a free-love colony in the Black Hills of South Dakota, a neo-Inca community at Machu Picchu, and exile to an outpost on Antarctica — to say nothing of the nuclear destruction of a large portion of eastern North America.

Slog is reasonably amusing, and it's got a refreshing amateur ebullience about it that makes up for some of the unevenness of Bellush's prose. Most of its obvious problems could be fixed with minimal effort by a competent editor. So did commercial publishing miss the boat here? I don't think so. *Slog* doesn't add up to anything. It leaves little impression on the mind after it's read. Bellush offers few memorable images of the future, no truly interesting contortions of character, no striking insights about the world, or life, or even New Jersey. There are plenty of manuscripts with just a little something more to chew on, or a somewhat larger potential market, for publishers to choose from.

Day 5: Mondo Trasho

It doesn't take long to rediscover how rare are the near-misses like *Slog*. Here's a novel by — yes, I'm reading that correctly — Mondo Fax, the Singing Judge. That is, believe it or not, a pseudonym. The author's real name is Alan Glasser, and he's really a judge: He has served as a judge *pro tempore* in the California state court system for the past eleven years.

Buying Time: A Jaunt in Time and Space (Mondo Fax Publishing, 2001, 297 pages, $11.95, *www.mondofax.com*) starts from a surreal premise that might have yielded something interesting in the hands of, say, Philip K. Dick. Five L.A. subway riders find themselves mysteriously transported to a world in which time works like money: You have to earn it. But Mondo makes a kind of karmic video game out of the idea — you earn time by helping others, or reliving memories (your own or someone else's) that enhance your personal growth. And it's rendered in aggressively amateurish prose. *Buying Time* reads

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like the product of several days of furious typing with minimal forethought. At its best, it races forward with a kind of heedless energy. At its worst, it comes close to incoherence: "The Cardinal paused while the disgusted 'failed con-man' look disappeared, and the supercilious 'holier-than-thou' false prophet ambiance poured over him like sugarless pancake syrup."

Dreaming Pigs by Lynne Carver (Paint Rock River Press, 2002, 256 pages, $11.95, *www.paintrockriverpress.com*) proceeds with all the steadiness and artistry of a home movie. It lacks focus, and there's a peculiar feverishness to the characters and their behavior. Having narrowly survived a collision with a log truck, Dean Malloy is "choking with emotion" as he thanks the police officer who helped him. When he gets his first look at the hideous sutured gash on his forehead, he's "transfixed" by "the horror of that image." The damage to his looks inspires heroic frustration and self-pity. "Love of beauty now seemed twisted and unfair. The superficiality of all mankind filled him with anger." All that in just four pages. Carver's got the emotional volume turned up so far it's exhausting to read.

Phillip Ellis Jackson's *Timeshift* (AmErica House, 2000, 211 pages, $19.95, *www.publishamerica.com*) is the literary equivalent of a B-grade 1950s sci-fi flick. It's got stiff cardboard characters, stilted dialogue, indigestible chunks of plodding exposition — even a high-tech underground lab and a premise based on the unforeseen consequences of nuclear radiation. Though it's set in the year 2416, it even sounds like a '50s movie. "'You ought to marry that poor girl soon and make an honest woman out of her,'" our hero advises his pal. Every scene gets a military-style timestamp: 18:05 hours, 11:46 hours. You can just about see the numerals etched in the lower-left corner of your screen.

Whew. It's starting to look like *Slog* is as good as it's going to get.

Day 6: Eureka

Having come this far, I can't pass up something with a title like this: *Terrapin, or, Captain Megaloman and His Trusty Sidekick Squidley Save the World Once Again* (Lithodendron, 298 pages, $12, no web site) by Tilper Manaday. I like the turtle on the cover, and there's something appealing about the playful type in which the title has been set.

What I find inside is the pleasantly absurd story of a young out-of-work engineer and the amazing

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alien contraption that he finds in his back yard — a machine that can teleport anything he wants to anywhere in the world (or anywhere in the cosmos), if he can give it the right instructions. With the help of his overweight megamillionaire neighbor — the Squidley of the title — Tom sets out to use the machine for the good of humanity, with all sorts of unintended consequences.

After twenty pages, I'm mildly surprised to find that I'm actually enjoying the book. Truly enjoying it. Manaday's got a bright, snappy style and a ready wit. The pacing feels right, the sentences flow, and the goofy story is suffused at times with a surprisingly humane and poignant spirit. It puts me in mind of Bradley Denton's second novel, *Buddy Holly Is Alive and Well on Ganymede*, or Jim Munroe's *Flyboy Action Figure (Comes with Gasmask)*. Tom and Squidley, a pair of well-meaning slackers, inspire affection from the start. "'Woman fear,'" says Squidley. "'I haven't talked to a woman since 1987, except to say how much is the bean salad or some such. You talk to her.'"

And it holds up all the way through. *Terrapin* has some rough edges and uneven stretches, but it's also got moments that approach real beauty. "Tom wouldn't have noticed her except she was wrapped in some private misery, and he could identify with that."

Terrapin isn't a landmark book. It's not an undiscovered masterpiece. But it is authentically enjoyable, and it's the one item among all the indie product I've looked through that I believe fully deserves a wide audience. Ironically, it's by far the hardest to acquire. You can find copies at eBay's Half.com, but the best way to get a copy is to order it directly from the author/publisher: P.O. Box 1083, Milton, Washington 98354.

On the seventh day, I rested. I had looked upon the world of indie publishing, and while most of what I had seen was not good, some of it actually was. But commercial publishers are not in any danger that I can see. Most readers will have neither the time nor the patience to seek out the few worthy needles in the towering haystack of PoD material. They'll be happy to let editors and agents sort through the slush pile, even if it means missing something like *Terrapin*. Indie publishing won't remake the industry, but if it allows more writers to fulfill the dream of seeing their work in print, and if it brings the occasional rough gem to light along the way — well, more power to it.

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Nick DiChario lives in upstate New York and is the fiction editor of the HazMat Review. *In recent years his publications have included* Death Dines at 8:30, *a mystery anthology he coedited with Claudia Bishop, and* Magic Feathers: The Mike & Nick Show, *a collection of his collaborations with Mike Resnick. Here he gives us a short and provocative piece that might make you wonder what's going on in that child's head or under that babe's hat...*

Dragonhead

By Nick DiChario

This is what you know:

KERMIT THE FROG IS LEFT-handed. Charlie Brown's father was a barber. Twenty-one percent of Americans claim to be regularly bored out of their minds. In Iowa, sixty-five traffic accidents a year are caused by cornstalks. According to Genesis 1:20-22, the chicken came before the egg. Thirteen people a year are killed by fallen vending machines.

This is what you hear:

—What are his chances, doctor? <Female voice of someone you think you might know.>

—I won't lie to you, Mrs. Lang. There is currently no known cure for Dragonhead. <Unknown male voice of reason.>

—Dragonhead. I hate that term. I *hate* it. <Familiar female voice again.>

—Everyone hates it. It's becoming the disease of the millennium.

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We're finally beginning to understand what digitalia addiction is doing to our children. But I have to be honest with you, for most young people that understanding comes too late.

—Digitalia. Another term I hate. Fancy word for digital implant. Fancy word for brain sex, is what it is.

—Actually, Mrs. Lang, mind fuck and information masturbation are the most common slang terms for—

—You don't have to talk like that. I know what it means.

—I'm sorry.

—That's all right...I'm just...I'm just desperate. Your program comes highly recommended. You've had success, haven't you, in some cases?

—Yes, a small percentage of patients have shown some improvement through a controlled regimen of neural shock therapy, but the results are varied. Most patients can't pull their minds out of the information stream, not even after the implants are removed and no more new data is getting in. Your son's chances are slim. You must understand that. Are you sure you want to put him through this? <Oh, doctor, my doctor.>

—I don't have a choice, do I? I have to try something. I can't lose him like this, so senselessly. I'll try anything...anything to get him back. Ian, Ian, do you hear me? Please come back, please. I'm your mother. You have a family and a life here with us, a God-given life. Doesn't that mean anything to you? <Mother, eh?>

—Please, Mrs. Lang, come away now. He can't hear you, or if he does, the words mean nothing to him; they're no different than any other words streaming through his head. It's time for us to start his first treatment. <Voice of Doctor Moreau, Doctor Spock, Doctor J., Doctor Seuss, Doctor Who, Doctor Iguana, Doctor Jet Engine, Doctor Alarm Clock, Doctor Demento, Doctor Boiling-Screaming-Dying Lobster wanted in New Jersey for petty larceny.>

—Doctor, Ian told me that the digitalia was harmless. He said it was nothing more than a tattoo, a tattoo in his cerebellum. Jesus. God. All his friends were getting it done. Why shouldn't he?

This is what you know:

Stars. Black stars dancing the bumblebee polka—stinging multiplying, imploding inside your brain, hot honey drip drip dripping down your

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spine. Leather straps. Cool smooth taste of airy neural electricity. Every hair follicle whispers sweet nothings in your skull. Subtle weight of iron and blood in your mouth. Is that water leaking from your eyes, or whalebones, or tailbones, or baseballs, or mothballs, or dictionaries, or pictionaries, or barbed wire, or haywire? Hard rock music makes termites chew through wood at twice their usual speed. A sneeze can travel as fast as one hundred miles per hour. Point three percent of all road accidents in Canada involve a moose. Babe Ruth wore a cabbage leaf under his baseball cap to keep his head cool. On the wall, a clock reads 4:20 AM or PM. In the movie *Pulp Fiction*, all the clocks remain frozen on 4:20. 4:20. 4:20. Wouldn't you like to be a fly on that wall?

Forever.

Pinprick...pinprick...kiss...kiss...kiss....

This is what you hear:

—Ian, it's me, your mamma. <Female voice of someone you think you might know.> Can you hear me? Talk to me, my beautiful baby. Say something. Anything. Please, Ian, come back to me. Come back. <Kiss.> He's not responding, doctor. He's not responding at all.

This is what matters:

A raindrop falls at approximately seven miles per hour. South Bend, Indiana, 1924, a monkey is arrested, convicted, and sentenced to pay a twenty-five dollar fine for smoking a cigarette. "False Dragonhead" is a wildflower, a member of the mint family, indigenous to the riverbanks and thickets of Minnesota, Quebec, and the mountains of North Carolina; when its flowers are pushed right or left, *they stay that way*; common nickname: obedient flower.

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We first met the alien whipdancers known as Marionettes back in July 1997 in "The Funeral March of the Marionettes." Adam says he didn't mean to let six years pass before returning to this universe, but a variety of things have kept him busy, including the other stories in his forthcoming collection Tangled Strings, *his novel* Spider-Man: Secret of the Sinister Six, *and oh yeah, his recent marriage to Judi Goodman. But at last we return to the planet Vlhan and the wait was worth enduring (but maybe the next story in this series will arrive before 2009!).*

The Tangled Strings of the Marionettes

By Adam-Troy Castro

1.

TRAVEL TO A CERTAIN plateau in the southern hemisphere of the planet Vlhan. It's a stark windswept place, far from the hives or migration routes of the native Vlhani, and well hidden from the many offworlders who have come to this world.

That's where you'll find the statue.

Its center is a mirrored black sphere, one meter in diameter, radiating eight long, serpentine cables in a frozen explosion of loops and spirals and helixes. Three of those cables are supports, holding the sphere two meters off the ground. The other five curl about in no obvious pattern, extending twenty meters at their greatest extension. They curl with such elegance that only a blind man would consider their positions random.

You'll no doubt recognize the statue as a realistic life-sized representation of a typical adult Vlhani, waving its prehensile whips in the sophisticated choreography of the all-dance language that distinguishes

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the species. They were called Vlhani by those who discovered them first, but you might prefer the many competing names other offworlders have given their kind: Spiders. Marionettes. Whipdancers. Even Buggies: Isadora, the first human being to achieve fluency in Vlhani, is said to have called them that.

You might even imagine yourself able to determine the significance of this particular tableau, but that's impossible. The species expresses meaning through movement, not static poses. An isolated instant like this, shorn of context, would be as meaningless to the Vlhani as the ultimate significance of their epic annual Ballet is to those of us who come to this world to watch their hundred thousand Chosen gather and perform and die. No Vlhani could make much of this artifact. Nor would you, unless you knew what it's doing here. You might assume it a monument, but you won't guess which kind.

My name's Paul Royko. I first traveled to Vlhan at the height of the Pre-War Era, a few short years after Isadora became the first human being to join the hundred thousand Vlhani who perform and die in their annual Great Ballet. The holos of her final moments had already been distributed throughout inhabited space, establishing her in the popular imagination as a tragic cult heroine. Thousands of similarly enhanced youths had already arrived on Vlhan, intent on following her example. But it was early yet. The humans who had not only passed through the various levels of selection, but been chosen for the fatal ceremony, still numbered only four. It was big news throughout human space whenever the Vlhani accepted another Hom.Sap applicant, bigger news when one performed. I came on assignment from a neural linkcaster no longer extant, to interview the latest: a young lady named Shalakan who was reported to be a dancer as brilliant as Isadora herself, and who was scheduled to perform and die in one week's time.

I thought she was the story.

The monument provides vivid testament that I was wrong.

2.

Ambassador Walster Croyd didn't want to see me at all; then when the proper strings got pulled he claimed an emergency and kept me

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waiting outside his office for ninety minutes past our original appointment time. I spent the time sitting on an uncomfortable chair in an anteroom with a temperature set to raise goosebumps on stone, recording every ache, every distant sound, and every overheard scrap of bureaucratic conversation that kept me company during the wait, letting my future audience know how I was treated, certain that my future audience would infer from all this the desperation of that sad species, the bureaucrat with no other way to demonstrate his own importance.

Then an aide waved me in and I found myself in the presence of Croyd himself. He was a white-haired, gray-eyed functionary, installed behind a desk that served no purpose grander than a place to rest his hands. That, and provide some cover: for Croyd also happened to be stark naked, with a sagging chest the texture of dry riverbeds.

There's always been a certain sad defiance that afflicts those who appreciate their own irrelevance. Even when their conduct is professional and their work is conscientious, even when they began with a passion for the job, the taste of failure remains all around them, rendering everything they do joyless and stale. I'd tasted that flavor in other Dip Corps outposts, when those were places where the natives bore special contempt for human beings. But it was pungent here. Ever since the Dance Pilgrims began to arrive on Vlhan, first in the hundreds and then in the thousands, the Confederate Embassy here had become little more than a shrill voice shouting itself hoarse as it struggled to make itself heard over the voices of thousands of amateurs whose own rapport with the natives was far more intimate than anything the diplomatic professionals could manage. For better or worse, the Dance Pilgrims had become humanity's embassy to Vlhan. The official Dip Corps facility, as represented by Croyd, was only there to maintain symbolic opposition to a thriving civilian movement they possessed no local authority to stop.

I saw at once that Croyd hated the very idea of me. He tapped a wooden implement of some kind against the desktop and said: "You're a vampire, you know that?"

"I'm a neurec slinger. Not the same thing."

"Sure as hell is. You both live off blood."

It was an ancient accusation against the reporters of news. And a facile one. I said nothing.

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"People die here," he said.

"People die everywhere," I told him.

"Except that here, it's a good story."

Again I said nothing.

"You don't have the slightest idea," he told me. "You don't live here. You don't work here. Do you even appreciate what it's like for us, to be damned to a place where children line up to commit suicide?"

I considered saying something glib about war. At that point in my career I'd already covered several. But it wasn't exactly appropriate to the present circumstances, so I just stood opposite the naked man, waiting.

"That's what the Ballet is," he said. "You can defend Vlhani culture, you can praise its artistic worth, you can dress it up in any justification you want, but it's still a bloody ritual suicide — and any human beings the spiders allow into the ceremony are just misguided children, destroying themselves in the service of a ritual that for all we know might not even have a bloody point."

The Dip Corps, and the Confederacy behind it, had maintained this position since the first day human beings found a place in the Vlhani Ballet. It failed to impress me. "I can name a hundred respected authorities who feel otherwise."

"Alien authorities. Riirgaans, AIsource, Bursteeni. They have an excuse. They can afford to be generous when it comes to human lives. It gives them more to study." His voice burned with venom now. "But you, Mr. Royko — you're actually here to encourage this madness. Spread its gospel throughout Hom.Sap space. Reward the sickness of these cultists with notoriety, make them heroes to the next misguided children looking for some stupid way to waste their lives."

I could have said that the Dance Pilgrims were notorious already and that I couldn't help it if people were fascinated with them. But that would have only encouraged him to continue the debate, and I had neither the time nor the patience for that. So I said: "I'm here to interview a dancer."

"A misguided suicide."

"An artist," I said. "Who wants to give her life for her art."

Croyd was almost purple with frustration. "It's still death."

"That's right," I said.

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My easy agreement infuriated Croyd more. His hands clenched and he rose from his seat, revealing more fatty sag than any human being should have to possess in the age of genomod and AIsource Medical. It might have been an affectation all its own, useful for an Ambassador desperate to establish a personal style in a service otherwise inhabited by a limited variety of functional types; in that event, the pale blue veins that lined the softer spots struck me as a particularly nice touch. Either way, he lurched across the spongy floor like a man who had never felt such a surface beneath his bare feet before. "I don't know why I even bother arguing with somebody like you. You're not here to have a conscience."

"How do you intend to stop me?"

He emitted a bitter laugh. "Stop you? I can't stop you. This is Vlhan. These aren't my laws to enforce."

"But you're not going to help me find her, either."

He said: "There are other people on-world equipped to do that. The Riirgaans, maybe. No, I just want to provide you a little warning."

A warning. Good. There was little my audience liked more than the whiff of danger. I turned up the gains and concentrated on one particularly ugly pockmark, right below his eye, as he leaned in close, attempting intimidation.

He used his index finger to jab my shoulder at every possible point of emphasis. "I say this to every human being I find trying to do business with the Pilgrim movement. I can't stop you from aiding and abetting this atrocity, but the Confederacy wants to shut down whoever's responsible for bringing these poor souls to Vlhan. We want to know who finds them. Who recruits them. Who installs their enhancements, and who brings them here." That last was accompanied by an especially sharp jab, intended to hurt. "I warn you. If you ever find out any of this, in the course of producing your recording, you are to bring it to me. If I ever find out that you withheld such information, the authorities will consider you aligned with these crimes against the human species and place you under arrest the second you set foot back inside our jurisdiction. Is that clear, Mr. Royko?"

I seized his finger in mid-jab and held it, motionless, in my clenched fist. "Clear, Mr. Croyd."

He yanked his finger free and blasted me with a faceful of breath so

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awful that it must have reflected deep inner rot. "Good. And I hope you got that on your precious recording."

3.

The Hom.Saps refused to offer any other assistance, so I followed Croyd's suggestion and went to the Riirgaans. Unlike our own officialdom, they actually believed in claims of a deep meaning behind the Vlhani Ballet, and were more than willing to help a lowly slinger intent on spreading the word. They set up the meet and loaded me aboard a remote skimmer bound for Shalakan's desert retreat.

It was dry country, colored in subtle variations of brown dirt. But the air was cool and the breeze was light and the angle of the sun cast a pleasant pink glow over the approaching night. It was the kind of place I might have chosen for a camping trip, had there ever been any chance of me taking a camping trip. A lone marionette grazed on scrub in the distance. Since its big round photoreceptor head was essentially one large 360-degree eye, I couldn't tell whether it took any particular notice of my arrival. I paid particularly close attention to it anyway, acquiring exotic detail, the chief skill of a good neurec slinger being constant awareness of which sensations needed to be nurtured for the playback.

The only other sign of life in the neighborhood was a sleepcube inflated beside a dry riverbed. It didn't look like a two-man model, designed for long treks into barren country, but a semi-permanent installation, big enough for entertaining visitors. I knew worlds where entire families lived in worse. If that was Shalakan's home, she was well-funded, though I'd have to ask whether that was by patrons or personal savings.

A woman emerged from the cube as my skimmer landed a short walk away. She was lithe and round-faced: the kind of combination that might have tempted me to call her pixie if I'd been willing to get slapped for it. She had the kind of eyebrows that knit together at the bridge of her nose, which might have given her a permanent frown if the metal disk affixed to the center of her forehead hadn't compensated. She wore a Riirgaan caste pendant on a chain over a green jumpsuit.

There was no chance of mistaking her for Shalakan herself, or for any of our own Dip Corps — not in that ensemble. She didn't seem to move

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like one of Shalakan's fellow Dance Pilgrims either. They had a liquid way about them. She was something else. Graceful, but something else.

Showing off for the pretty lady, I hopped from the skimmer and onto the dirt. Big mistake. My ankles felt like they'd just been riven with spikes. (Probably not a good detail to keep for the playback.) I managed to approach without limping. "Ow. Hello."

She covered her smile with one hand. "Ow yourself. Are you all right?"

"Just temporarily crippled."

"I can see that. Is this your way of establishing rapport with your subjects, Mr. Royko? Major muscle sprains?"

The language was Hom.Sap Mercantile, the accent Riirgaan, complete with their characteristic epic slurred r's. Whoever she was, she'd spent more time with the lizards than with other human beings. An exile?

I slapped the side of the skimmer, sending it back into the sky and from there back to its Riirgaan masters. "Naaah. Sometimes, with the tough ones, I go for compound fractures. And you're...?"

"Deeply amused," she said. Then she relented: "Need any help?"

I took another step and discovered that my leg could take the weight with only a minimal degree of resentment. "No, I can make it. You can call me Paul, if you want."

"My name's Ch'tpok." That was a good accent all right. She managed that central hiccup better than any non-Riirgaan I'd ever heard.

I wasn't nearly as good. I almost choked on it. "Chuppock?"

"Don't worry if you can't get it on the first try," she said, providing an extra-careful pronounciation: "Ch'tpok."

I tried Chitpock, Cheatpock and Chatpock before establishing to our mutual satisfaction that Chuppock was as close as I was likely to get. She didn't take it seriously: I gathered that correct pronounciations from her fellow humans were as rare as generous compliments from the Tchi. By then we'd also established that she was an exolinguist, third grade, trained by the Riirgaans to specialize in Vlhani Dance. She said that she'd been a citizen of the Riirgaan republic since the age of four years Mercantile.

Still working out the limp, I asked: "How did that happen?"

"How else? Crazy idealist parents who thought renouncing their

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species made some kind of point about an issue long since forgotten." That really was an insistent smile she had, but anybody who grew up among the stony-faced Riirgaans probably had cause to overcompensate. "I'm not bigoted against Hom.Saps, if that's what you're thinking. It was all political, and I never bought into it."

"Parents happy about that?"

"Parents defected again a couple of years later, this time to some kind of sentient spore-colony. Last I heard they were still growing underground somewhere. They were pretty insane, really." She noted this with a friendly wink, establishing, or at least trying to establish, that nothing about these experiences had left her bitter. "Naaah, I recognize my species. I know my biological roots. I just don't use them for legal purposes. I stay Riirgaan because that's where my credentials are."

The phenomenon wasn't unheard of; I knew of three wealthy Hom.Saps who had aligned themselves with the software intelligences known as the AIsource just to avoid the Confederacy's ruinous taxes. And the entire Dance Pilgrim movement, here on Vlhan, was about human beings altering themselves to fit into an alien ritual. But it was still discomfiting. Despite being a fine model of her birth species, Ch'tpok's citizenship rendered her legally not human...a status which would have kept her from being recognized as a human being in any Hom.Sap court. Without defecting back to her birth species, she would not be able to own Hom.Sap property, enjoy the protection of Hom.Sap laws, or even enjoy a legal partnership with another human being. I wondered if she'd ever traveled in human space, and just how much inconvenience she must have suffered along the way — questions that rendered her an excellent possible future neurec subject, once I was finished with the story at hand. But right now Shalakan took precedence. I asked, "Did your embassy send you here to meet me?"

"No. Dalmo and Shalakan have been letting me observe her last few months of training."

"Dalmo?"

"Shalakan's husband."

Nobody had mentioned a husband. It disturbed me. Who would get married when their greatest ambition in life was to die violently as soon as possible? "Where are they?"

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"Shal's out communing with the Vlhani; she'll be back later. Dalmo's inside. He would greet you himself, but he's not feeling well today."

Ch'tpok lifted the flap of the sleepcube and we went in. The interior was bright, mostly from sunlight filtering through the cloth. It was sparse, too; a couple of hammocks, a food chest, a few instruments likely belonging to Ch'tpok, and one or two other boxes too small to provide much in the way of civilized amenities. The light came from a single hoverglobe. There was soft music playing: not human, as far as I could tell, but something a human being could listen to without retching. Shalakan's ailing husband was not lying in bed, as I'd expected, but standing on one leg. The other leg and everything from the waist up extended parallel to the ground, facing downward, like a body lying on an invisible mattress. Thin, sunken-cheeked, sweaty, and hollow-eyed, he bore the look of a man whose ailments had set in a lot earlier than just today, but he seemed comfortable enough, even if, like me, he belonged to that unfortunate subspecies of sleeper afflicted with terminal drool-mouth. He wore only a thin gray cloth around his waist. His arms, spread out at his sides like wings, each displayed several joints too many; they undulated gently as he slept, the contractions moving from shoulders to fingertips in waves.

My aching bod felt all the more inadequate as I sank into a seated position on the food chest. "That's him, I guess."

"That's Dalmo," Ch'tpok said, adding an unnecessary: "He's a Dance Pilgrim too."

At least that explained how he could bear a suicidal wife; he had the same odd sense of priorities. "How come he's not out with the missus?"

Ch'tpok's smile didn't falter, even as her eyes turned grim. "The Vlhani didn't invite him."

"This party's for Selected only?"

"Uh huh. Last-minute choreography."

I tried to imagine the alien protocols that dictated how Shalakan should move one way, and not another, while dancing herself to death. I knew it made a difference to the spiders; it was the basis of their greatest cultural artifact. But did it make a difference to Shalakan? Did she feel the rightness of these last-minute instructions? Did she change a twitch and say, oh, yes, you're right, that part always bothered me, thanks for helping me finally get it right?

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And what about Dalmo? "Doesn't it bother him? Even a little?"

"Not...really," said Dalmo. (I attributed his slow speech to his illness, but I soon learned he always spoke like a drunk, or like a man trying to sound drunk. The words left his mouth at irregular intervals, like prisoners escaping in shifts to avoid the attention of guards.) "Mister Royko," he said, and licked his lips. There was an especially long pause as he parsed the rest of the sentence. "My wife has important work to do. Good morning, Chuppi."

It happened to be late afternoon. If Dalmo had gone to sleep the night before, he'd been unconscious for most of a day. But Ch'tpok humored him: "Good morning, Dalmo. Feeling better?"

"Yes." He paused. "Never felt bad. Calculating. Had to work out some variables."

"I figured," Ch'tpok said. "Any luck?"

"Some. Real progress."

"Up to talking about it?"

"Need to dance first." He grimaced and lowered his other leg. His flexible enhanced arms uncoiling, straightening, assuming fixed joints at elbow-height, he soon became an approximation of any other unenhanced human — albeit a painfully thin one, with a lip that drooped to the right. I'd grown up in a habitat too poor for an AIsource Medical contract, so I'd seen what unprosthetized stroke victims looked like. It's a rare sight, some other places. Dalmo walked like that, too: no obvious paralysis, but with the slow deliberation of a man for whom every step required careful planning. Ch'tpok hovered close as if she feared he'd fall. I supposed it wasn't hard to see why the Vlhani hadn't cast him in the great honking suicide-show; they needed graceful dancers, and this poor shmo could barely move.

I almost didn't want to follow them outside, for fear he'd mistake my recently acquired limp as mockery. But I did. No point in alienating the hubby.

Out in the twilight, Dalmo unfolded again, tripling his height, becoming a torso that bobbed like a puppet at the center of four looping and twirling limbs. He showed nothing approaching the grace of a Vlhani, or even of those humans who'd made themselves enough like Vlhani to earn a place in the Ballet, but his performance was still impressive enough,

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especially the way he made those outstretched arms seem to bubble and twist like vapor buffeted by a strong wind.

"See?" he said, with strain. "I parsed it. I made it work. It's progress."

"I believed you," Ch'tpok said.

"I'll have to show Shal. She should know."

Ch'tpok hesitated a few seconds before answering. "You're right."

Dalmo displayed some more moves, all slow, all impossible for normal human physiology, all well within the peculiar faux-Vlhani anatomy that the Pilgrims try so hard to achieve. The performance hurt to watch, but not because of the contortions themselves; I had already seen other enhanced Pilgrims twist themselves into even greater knots. Watching Dalmo hurt more because moving that way clearly cost him more. And it hurt for another reason, too: familiarity. There was something about the hold his art had on his life that felt like an old friend I'd abandoned a long time ago.

He must have spotted my sympathetic pain. "You like to dance, Mr. Royko?"

I tried to match his flippant tone. "I know a waltz or two."

"Any good at them?"

"Well," I smiled, "Not according to any woman who's ever endured my tries."

His limbs twirled in great jagged jerks. "Nothing Vlhani?"

It was a joke. He had to see I wasn't physically equipped for it. "Sorry."

"Pity." His limbs retracted, drawing closer to his body. "I hope you're not one of those people who think we're crazy for doing this."

"Like Ambassador Croyd?" I said.

"You met him? I'm sorry to hear that. He's exactly the kind of closed-minded bigot I would have expected the Dip Corps to send out here. They don't post anybody who wouldn't like to shut the Ballet down. He won't even keep an open mind. Just calls us crazy cultists and turns his back whenever we try to share what we know."

"Sounds like him all right," I said. "If you leave out his nudity."

Dalmo clucked. "He's still doing that? Ah well. And what's your opinion, Mr. Royko? Of the dance, not the Ambassador's unmentionables."

"I haven't made up my mind yet."

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"Sometimes, I don't think I've made up my mind either." He expanded his limbs again. "This isn't an easy thing to want to do with your life. It isn't a normal thing to want. It's especially hard to justify when the people questioning you don't understand the only language capable of providing answers. But the explanation's in the Ballet. The Vlhani see it. Isadora saw it. Shal and I see it. I would be overjoyed to make you see it, too, Mister Roy."

That's as far as he got. He froze in position before finishing my name, the unspoken "...ko" a breath stuck in his throat.

I waited, but the rest of the sentence did not seem imminent. After a moment, I turned to Ch'tpok and saw tear-tracks on her cheeks that shone red from the setting Vlhani sun. Her smile was still there, still as unforced as before, but now informed by a sadness as complicated as the Ballet itself.

She said: "Are you beginning to see the nature of his problem?"

4.

Back inside the sleepcube, Ch'tpok described Dalmo's ailment as a matter of incompatible software.

The dance that comprises everyday Vlhani language is easy enough for those born to it. The Ballet is no doubt more difficult, but it's just an advanced application of the same basic tools. They have the whips. They have neural pathways capable of manipulating them. They have brains evolved to parse a complex language that expresses multiple-level datastreams via the wave-form oscillations of their flexible limbs. They can understand it because it's how they're built. They evolved that way.

We, on the other hand, evolved somewhere else.

The first Dance Pilgrim, Isadora, demonstrated by vivid example that certain human beings were not only capable of understanding the Ballet, but somehow vital to its continuing development as the centerpiece of the Vlhani culture.

This, of course, made no sense. Why would random individuals from a totally different species that evolved three hundred light-years away have such a freakish understanding of a ritual that the greatest linguists and behaviorists of a dozen other sentient species were still unable to parse?

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It was impossible.

It couldn't be true.

There was no way for it to be true.

But Isadora proved that it was.

And the Pilgrims who came after her showed that she wasn't a one-of-a-kind fluke. Most of them were not much more than the children Ambassador Croyd alleged them to be: adolescents, or post-adolescents. But alerted to the Ballet's existence by the holos and neurecs distributed throughout Hom.Sap space, before the Confederacy had a chance to appreciate the forces this would set in motion, all of these people saw something vital in the Ballet, something that had to be preserved — something that only their own participation could fix.

Alas, even those humans who possessed the raw talent couldn't manage the dance without compensating for the limitations of human physiology.

A Vlhani whip is many thousands of times more flexible than the most elastic cord available to humanity, with flexible segments less than a tenth of a millimeter apart, and muscle/joint combinations facilitating an almost unlimited range of movement between them. The average Vlhani possesses a dozen other whips just like it. Creating prosthetics for human use was a serious mechanical problem, but the operating software was a real bitch. Since we've never been wired to manipulate a thicket of limbs that bend in that many places, let alone to move them with such coordinated grace they can function as performance elements in a complex and demanding art form, humans driven to dance Vlhani need AI and bionics to manage it. The unknown agencies responsible for providing the Pilgrims with their enhancements — agencies the Confederacy would have liked to identify and prosecute — dealt with the problem by installing networks of sophisticated micro-controllers, which constantly perform the millions of tiny calculations necessary to translate a human dancer's imagination into a Vlhani dancer's grace.

It's a hideously complicated process that needs direct communication with the nervous systems involved.

According to Ch'tpok, the system still had a long way to go.

"The enhancements work," Ch'tpok said. "Just not very well. Dalmo's nervous system resists the interface."

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"Tissue rejection?" AIsource Medical had licked that problem, but human surgeons still encountered it once in a while.

"No," Ch'tpok said. "Software problems."

"Does it happen a lot?"

"Too often," she said. "Dalmo freezes up several times a day. Sometimes for hours. Data traffic while he plots his movements. He has to make millions of calculations just to choreograph a few seconds of Vlhani dance. Even normal human movement isn't easy for him, which is why he has so much trouble walking and talking. It's a fairly common problem among the Pilgrims."

"I never heard of it."

"I'm not surprised. Your government may frown on it, but most of human space still glamorizes the Ballet, sees it as something beautiful and even transcendent. Your literature tends to focus on the famous successes like Shalakan or the lost, sainted Isadora." She rolled her eyes in case I didn't get the sarcasm. "But about thirty percent of those who arrive here with enhancements also suffer some kind of degenerative neurological impairment."

All the Pilgrims I'd seen, in the various creches and settlements I'd visited, had possessed whipdance enhancements in perfect order. "Where do they keep the disabled ones?"

"Various places around Vlhan. Inside Vlhani hives. They tend not to mix."

"And they can't be fixed? Ever?"

"Hom.Sap medicine can't. Neither can Riirgaan. Even the AIsource Medics say it's impossible. Maybe the folks who originally made the installations could — but they don't provide any of these poor people with the means to contact them for warranty work."

"Because they're afraid of being exposed and shut down," I said.

"You got it," said Ch'tpok.

It made grim sense. Vlhan may have been a sovereign world, unbound by human law, but the Hom.Sap Confederacy still remained dedicated to putting those responsible for facilitating the Dance Pilgrims out of business. Any Pilgrim who left the planet could lead our agents right back to them.

Even so, keeping the surgery underground seemed a cold precaution

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in the face of somebody whose enhancements seemed easier to classify as disabilities. I peered out the window at Dalmo. He had become unfrozen, his limbs spiraling around him in gestures that communicated both exuberance and frustration. "Thirty percent."

"Yes," said Ch'tpok. "Most worse off than him, with nothing to show for it."

I juggled half a dozen possible followup questions before settling on the certainty I heard in Ch'tpok's voice. It was the sound of a woman who lived close to this subject, and in her own personal way, considered it sacred: the sound that had been in her voice all day. I put a few things together and came to a realization I'd been building since my arrival. "And you're not here to study Shalakan, are you? You're not even here to study the Vlhani. You're here for Dalmo."

Her nod was placid. "That's right. I am."

"Why?"

"Because he's the visionary."

The word surprised me. "Visionary?"

"The only kind that means anything on this world. The Vlhani kind." She held my solemn stare, then flashed her insistent smile again. "You'll see."

5.

The hours were pleasant but frustrating. Ch'tpok turned out to be the kind of charming conversationalist who specializes in making sure little of value is actually said. I liked her. I had a good time speaking to her. But she provided me with precious little data I didn't already have.

She apologized again for Shalakan's lateness. I told her again that it was okay.

She described the nature of Dalmo's impairments in more detail than my own technophobic education allowed. I pretended to understand.

She made the same grandiose claims about the Ballet's significance that the Dance Pilgrims and her own government's translation project had made a thousand times before. She failed to persuade me.

At one point she quizzed me about my profession. Where had I been? What had I seen? Had I downloaded anything that got distributed in

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Riirgaan space? I told her about my biggest coup to date, a spectacular close-up view of a bloody political assassination so carefully orchestrated by the opposition party that its scheduled time and location were actually posted in advance via hytex. Then I dove back into my own questions. What I got in return was charm, and very little that differed from the Pilgrim party line.

We heard the first Vlhani three hours after nightfall. People who don't live on planetary deserts can't really appreciate how dark it had become. With the exception of the dim circle of yellow light that surrounded the Dalmo/Shalakan residence, there was nothing, from unseen horizon to unseen horizon, that gave off or reflected any illumination at all. It imparted a terrific sense of isolation, more psychological than sensual, which made it impossible to catch on neurec even with the gains set on full: a lot like being in a locked closet without any doors.

Nor could I gauge the distances of the sounds carried by the cool evening air — the whispering thwuf-thwuf-thwuf made by the pointed ends of many Vlhani whips spearing the earth for traction could have been either meters or kilometers away. I wondered how many there were and if they approached from all directions. Aware that this particular sound hadn't always meant good news for the human beings who heard it (as in the Embassy Massacre of a few years earlier), I even felt a twinge of fear.

But Ch'tpok led me outside, to a spot only meters from the immobile Dalmo. His face, lit on one side by light from the sleepcube, was a pale yellow crescent, glistening where beads of sweat had collected during the day. His eyes had turned toward the desert to follow the thwuf-thwuf-thwuf moving closer with every breath.

"Look," Ch'tpok murmured.

The first Vlhani became visible only as a spot of yellow light: an image of the sleepcube, reflected off the smooth chitin of its great round head. That head, almost an arm's-length across, came into focus a heartbeat later, bobbing along atop four striding whips while three others gestured wave-forms in the open air. It bypassed Dalmo, moved toward us, and undulated its whips at length.

"A greeting," Ch'tpok said. "An acknowledgment. An offer of peace."

"What do we say back?"

"We don't have to say anything. We're not wearing whip-harnesses."

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That was a Riirgaan invention which, when worn, allowed diplomats to mimic Vlhani movement enough to permit some basic communication. "Unenhanced people are more or less mute as far as they're concerned, and that it would be silly to expect a response. As long as we do nothing to the contrary, it will assume we got the message."

The Vlhani moved away from us and approached Dalmo. Extending its whips to their full length, lifting its head thirty meters into the air, it stepped over Dalmo and spiked the dirt on all sides of him, imprisoning him in a cage of its own sinuous limbs.

Another yellow reflection popped out of the darkness. Another Vlhani. This one didn't bother to pay its respects to us, probably because its cousin had already taken care of that formality. This one went straight to the living structure that now enclosed Dalmo, and extended a pair of whips inside. They touched Dalmo's cheeks, then withdrew. The newcomer moved aside, not returning to the darkness, but instead waiting as a third and a fourth and a fifth Vlhani also emerged from the desert to caress the altered man's face.

By the time the sixth Vlhani showed up, I knew I was in for a parade that might last a while. "What are they doing?"

"What do they look like they're doing?" Ch'tpok asked.

"I don't have the slightest idea. I don't know Vlhani."

"I don't know it either; this thing," she tapped the silver memory disk on her forehead, "gives me the best working reference my people could compile, but I don't need its help to understand what I'm seeing. Come on, you have eyes. What is this?"

I didn't much like the sensation of being quizzed like a primary-schooler in the prep classes before his first upload. "Are they worshipping him?"

"Good guess. But you're not quite right."

"Where am I off?"

"They're worshipping something."

The Vlhani marching out of the desert all approached Dalmo with clear and unmistakable reverence. But what could be drawing them, if not Dalmo himself?

Ch'tpok moaned with frustration. "Think, Paul. Vlhani don't believe in gods, as far as we can tell, and they're far too smart to worship humans."

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"Riirgaans, then?"

She laughed. "Nice try. No, that wasn't species chauvinism. They don't worship us either."

Us, I thought. Another indication of how deeply she identified with her adopted people. "Then what?"

"Come on. It's not hard to figure out. What's their big ritual? The only thing they find sacred?"

"The Ballet?"

"See? It wasn't hard."

"But Dalmo's not in the Ballet."

"That's right. And he won't ever be. He can't process the variables that quickly."

"Then why would they give him such special attention?"

"Because he's still the dance."

I still didn't get it, and I'd run out of time to complain about it. Because the next shape to emerge from the darkness was Shalakan herself.

6.

My briefing on Shalakan had included holos taken on the day the Vlhani first selected her.

Like most of the humans chosen, she was barely out of her childhood at the time. She had been a skinny kid not far into her late teens, with eyes too close together and a chin that came to a point; the brief interviews she'd permitted at the time had painted her as a dazed laureate indeed, neither honored nor thrilled but instead overwhelmed that the future she had sought was hers. Back then, her answers to even the simplest questions had been a series of inarticulate sentence fragments isolated by oppressive silences. She'd ultimately chosen to express her feelings the Vlhani way...and when she'd danced, following an alien choreography that shouldn't have resonated among humans, she had seemed not only enhanced but divine. Her arms and legs, human enough at rest, had elongated and circled her in great, swooping spirals so filled with purpose that it was next to impossible to watch them, even on holo, and not wonder if there was music the average human being was unable to hear.

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That had been two years ago.

It was now several surgeries later. None had anything to do with augmenting her fitness for the Vlhani ballet; she'd possessed all that equipment at the moment of choosing. The overwhelming impression given by the newest changes, between the fresh green glow of her eyes and the amoebic tattoos in constant motion beneath the exposed skin of her arms and legs, was shallow exoticism for its own sake. There had been imaginative things done to her breasts, her nose, her hands, her hair, all of which had given her a precious, fussed-over beauty of the sort desired by anybody who courts fame above all things. But as she approached her husband, her flexible arms twisting above her head in the wave-forms of Vlhani dance, the changes seemed less vain than defiant: bids to accentuate her humanity even as she gave herself up to this most alien form of speech.

Then she spotted Ch'tpok and me, patted Dalmo's arm, and moved toward us, her enhanced legs bearing her upper body with grace so total that she didn't even seem to be walking. She was more like a princess being transported by palanquin.

She nodded Ch'tpok's way, using a Riirgaan honorific: "Hello again, Learned One." Something had been done to her voice too; it had been doubled, trebled, giving every word she spoke the resonance of a Greek chorus.

"Hello," Ch'tpok said. She still smiled, but now there was no warmth behind it; it was just the polite rictus of a woman turning civility into a putdown.

Shalakan turned to me next. "You're the neurec man, right?"

"That's right," I said, calculating how all this body tinkering would play for my mass audience. "Paul Royko."

She shook my hand; though I knew hers to be artificial, there was nothing about its touch that would have alerted me had I not already known. It felt real enough, perhaps even delicate: warmer than the usual touch, but that could be easily explained as leftover heat from a day spent beneath the desert sun. Even so, the moment of contact felt more like a caress: a combination of the added flexibility her enhancements provided her, and what was probably a deliberate attempt to spike her sex appeal for the neurec. I saw through it at once, and didn't care: it still worked on me.

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"I'm so sorry I'm late, Mr. Royko. The Ballet is fluid, you know. It always requires adjustments, up to the very moment of performance."

I almost coughed. "So I've been told."

"It will be worth it the day we dance," she said. "You'll see."

The passion in her eyes was that of a woman eager for the moment of her own extinction; it ended my momentary attraction, but only just. She was that good.

I was certain this would be a popular neurec.

"I wasn't told how much you'd changed since your last holos."

She glanced at the recombinant tattoo extending pseudopods along one arm. "It's nonsense, I know. Vanity. The spiders have no use for such things, but I thought it might be useful."

"Why?"

"Because, as a showman like yourself should know, it's precisely the kind of flashy surface detail that fascinates human beings. However long it takes the various recordings of this performance to get past customs — and you know they will, Mr. Royko; the Confederate embargo's a joke — looking like this will ensure them the proper degree of attention in Hom.Sap circles."

"And that's important to you? The fame?"

"No," she said. "But the next generation of human dancers has to come from somewhere."

Her gaze flickered toward Ch'tpok. I saw no warmth in either that look or the look Ch'tpok gave her in return. I got, and recorded, the clear impression that only the respect prevented the unsheathing of claws. Then she addressed me again: "Whatever happens after tonight, Mr. Royko, I hope you take the time to see Dalmo at work. I know it's easy to underestimate him because of his problems. But he's the dance."

"Chuppock said the same thing. But she wouldn't tell me what she meant."

"Maybe she couldn't, Mr. Royko. Hom.Sap Mercantile's such an imprecise language. Maybe the concept would make more sense in Vlhani. But that's still pretty much all there is to it, in words or choreography. Dalmo is the dance."

I struggled to get that. "Are you saying he personifies it?"

"No," she said. "Only that he understands it. That he knows it all the

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way from the beginning, and all the way to its inevitable end. All its thousands of performances, before and after. And everything that comes after this point won't happen without him."

I tried a retreat to the story I knew about: Shalakan herself. "Can you tell me if you'll — "

Shalakan pressed the tip of her index finger to my lips: it tasted of equal parts human skin and desert sand, not at all the synthskin compound I knew her flesh to be. "Spend some time with him later. Tell him it was his accomplishment, not mine. Tell him I danced because he can't."

Then she returned to her husband. She wrapped her arms around him: a phrase that would have been a mere hug when performed by most women but was pure literal description when attributed to her. Her arms encircled him once, twice, three times, looping under his arms and over his shoulders and back around his body again. She lashed herself to him so tightly she might have feared being torn away by hurricane winds, and she kissed his lips, his chin, and his shoulders, moving down along the frozen arch of his body with passion that made her malleable spine ripple like a banner. He responded, too: throwing off his paralysis, sinking toward the ground in a moment of absolute surrender, then bracing his limbs against the dirt and lifting both his wife and himself a full three meters from the ground where we stood.

For me, it was like seeing Sleeping Beauty, revived by the touch of her own true love...except with the genders reversed and the participants altered into something more Vlhani than human.

It was simultaneously the most repugnant and the most erotic thing I'd ever seen.

"They'll make love now," Ch'tpok said.

And that was the most unneeded explanation. "Looks like it."

I made no other move.

She placed a hand on my shoulder. "They're still human, Paul. They don't particularly mind if the Vlhani watch; they know the Vlhani don't care much one way or the other. But we should show them some privacy."

I'll confess to a moment's hesitation. The temptation to record this particular coitus for neural playback was so overwhelming it burned. But even a neurec slinger is subject to appeals for decency. The words were resentful, but they did come. "All right."

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"They'll probably talk to you tomorrow morning."

Dalmo and Shalakan were all over each other now, thirty meters up: bobbing up and down atop legs like stilts. It looked perverse and grotesque and epic and oddly beautiful. Despite all I would learn and all I would come to understand, it would be the only time in my life I'd ever wish to be enhanced their way.

After we reentered the sleepcube, and Ch'tpok activated a white sound generator to block out the noises from outside, I had the thought which banished my envy forever. "That's good-bye for them, isn't it?"

Ch'tpok, who had been getting us some buzzpops from her supplies, nodded. "Yes. She'll be going off with these Vlhani shortly after dawn. They're all headed for...you know."

"Damn." I accepted the narcotic but didn't patch any to my flesh. "Won't Dalmo be able to keep her company along the way?"

"In theory, he's allowed to follow along at a respectful distance. Knowing him, he'll freeze up every few kilometers and get left behind. My government will offer him a skimmer ride to the Ballet as a courtesy (that is, if he even wants to watch), but it doesn't really matter either way as far as his relationship with his wife is concerned; once she leaves here, he won't be permitted any communication with her ever again." She flipped the buzzpop and slapped more against her bare skin; certainly more than I'd ever taken myself, even in the long hard times after a download. Her eyes glazed. "I really thought I'd be all right with this; it's all I've been thinking of since I came to live with them...."

I patched a buzz just to be companionable, and bit back a grimace at the feedback. Partaking isn't really recommended for a neurec slinger in record mode. "They're your friends."

Another daunting sniff by Ch'tpok. "Dalmo is."

"I noticed you didn't like Shalakan."

Now, a moment's distance. "I don't dislike her. But we're not friends."

"Why not?"

"She's a little too swallowed up by what she intends to do. Everything's about getting ready for her dance. Even her relationship with Dalmo is less about two people supporting each other than it is about providing support for her legend. Until now, I wasn't sure she would have anything left for

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him even at the end. I was hoping she would, but I didn't think — " She spread her hands, and sat down a little too heavily. "I don't know. Maybe that little display outside is for your benefit, too."

"What do you believe?"

She considered that. "I believe they're geniuses who also happen to be flawed human beings. But it's so hard to watch what it's costing them that I sometimes find myself wishing my people could come up with their own phrase for God damn it. I get so tired of repeating the Hom.Sap version."

To hell with the feedback. I turned off the recording and patched as much buzzpop as I could stomach. "Yeah. So do I."

She showed enough class to not look surprised. But her eyes were questioning.

I heaved a deep breath. "You know the dumbest cliché about slingers? That we're unfeeling sensation mongers. That we're just sterile conduits, piping sights and sounds to the masses." I took another buzz, shivered, and went on: "The truth is, most of us stumble into the biz running away from feelings we no longer want."

"Does it work?"

"Not really. We're not just paid to see it; we're paid to feel it. We have to be sensitive to make it real. We sometimes have to feel it so hard it hurts to go on. Otherwise, it's just pointless, sterile crap."

She saw from my eyes that there had to be more. "And?"

"And eventually we see so much we get jaded. We wear grooves in our empathy. And our networks start sending us to bigger and nastier places — catastrophes, civil wars, even assassinations like the one I told you about — just to break through to that part of us which is still capable of being moved." I cast a thumb in the direction of the sleepcube flap. "Like the Ballet. Like watching two people like that destroy themselves in the service of a cause I can't even understand. So yeah. I know what it's like to get tired of saying, 'Oh My God.'"

Ch'tpok chewed on that, then blinked through her tears and switched off the white sound, allowing an occasional gasp or whisper to make its way through the few short meters and thin layer of fabric that separated the two people inside the sleepcube from the two bidding farewell outside.

A moment more and she plunged us both into matching darkness.

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And, settling by my side, said: "I think I'll go insane if all I'm allowed to do is listen."

After a moment, I said, "Me, too."

She nestled a little closer. "You won't take it too personally, will you? If we do something to pass the time?"

"Not if you won't."

I was a slinger, after all. And slingers were all about enjoying sensations without allowing themselves to be touched by them.

7.

What was it like with her? Considering that it was our first time, and the second was a decade away?

I'd like to say that we took it as more than a moment's distraction from the magnitude of the parting taking place a few short meters away. But I'd be lying. The truth was that neither of us was really there. I was accustomed to considering every sensation, every moment of experience, as an element in a larger story that needed proper manipulation in order for all the proper notes to be played. I may have thought I liked her, but like all slingers I lived in the service of novelty, considered it my stock in trade, and was too detached, too jaded, to see my few moments with Ch'tpok as much more than that.

As for Ch'tpok, I don't think she really cared about me being there at all: I was just a useful emotional anesthetic that didn't work as well as expectations. I tasted the anger in the form of the tears on her cheeks, and though I could not understand the Riirgaan phrases she whispered both during and afterward, I could still tell they were not directed toward me. I would later wonder if they were words she wished Dalmo could hear, but I don't think that's what they were. They were curses, muttered by the lost.

Much later on, when we were both floating on the edges of sleep, the sounds from outside the sleepcube had faded, Ch'tpok placed a hand on my chest and murmured another Riirgaan word: "Darrr'pakh."

I didn't open my eyes. "What?"

"Riirgaan word. Means teacher. A very special kind of teacher." Her index finger found a hair on my chest, played curling games with it. "He

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teaches a lesson that all Riirgaan children need to learn, and learn well, in order to earn the rights of a free adult in their society. It's a difficult lesson, I understand; it takes a full year, by their calendar, and some children fail. I won't say what happens to them, except to say that their productive lives are, essentially, over; they don't get educations, they don't get jobs, they don't mix with the general population, they don't have futures. They don't get a second chance."

A breeze from somewhere cooled sweat on my forehead. "Did you take the course, Chuppock?"

"Of course. I was legally Riirgaan, and bound by Riirgaan tradition."

"And?"

She tapped my chest again. "I was also a human being, and I failed."

The regret in her voice was so palpable I searched for her other hand, found it, gave her a reassuring squeeze. "But you're here. They didn't do...whatever they do to the others."

"That's because I'm human. They knew that I couldn't. They couldn't penalize me for that. But they also knew that I could never be Riirgaan too unless I was at least given the chance to try. The end result is that I'm one of them all right...but I'm also the only one who never had to meet the one sacred standard that otherwise allowed no exceptions. So I'm also always apart."

I groped for something to say about that. "Maybe it's not the right place for you."

"Maybe." She let that hang for a while, perhaps challenging me to come up with something more relevant to say...then accepted my silence and sat up, facing the sleepcube wall as if hoping to see what was happening on the other side. I reached for her but she was just out of reach; and when I didn't try to pull her back, she moved still farther away, receding into shadow. Her profile became a distant crescent floating in darkness, like the narrowest phase of a moon searching for the place it was meant to orbit.

8.

I never got my interview. I never learned Shalakan's real name, or where she came from, or how she'd reached the decision that this one

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ritual was more important than any human endeavor. I probably shouldn't have expected to do so; in those early years of the Human-Vlhani connection, the dancers made a point of rejecting their pasts. Like her predecessors Isadora and Gabriel and Xavis, who had taken this journey before her, or Melaniherz, whose own infamous performance would follow, Shalakan admitted to nothing but humanity...and she entered the dance knowing that ten thousand worlds would pretend to be her birthplace.

By the time I woke up the next morning, staring through a thin layer of sleepcube canvas at a sun still bright enough to glare, she and the Vlhani had already fled for the Ballet, now only four days away. I lifted the still-sleeping Ch'tpok's arm off my chest, fell back into the same clothes from the night before, and emerged from the sleepcube to find the desert bright, stiflingly hot, and empty but for one. That one, Dalmo, sat cross-legged on the ground, staring at a horizon that had probably swallowed his departing wife hours before. Though his eyes were dry, his hands still drew obsessive patterns in the dirt.

I might have thrown a fit about broken promises, but there wasn't any point. This man, misguided or not, had just lost a lot more. So I sat down beside him, and for a minute or so shared a companionable silence. In this light, it was easy to see that he was just a kid, not much older than Shalakan, but his hollow cheeks and sunken eyes and the sense of unavoidable loss made him look ancient, as well: like a man who had progressed from childhood to dotage without a stop in between.

I asked. "Are you all right?"

"She's not gone," Dalmo said, his fingertip tracing a loop-de-loop in the desert. "She'll never be gone."

He sounded like every other self-deluded fanatic I'd ever heard, but it was not the time to make a point of that either. "Did she say anything before she went?"

"You mean," he flashed a grim smile, "anything meant for you?"

"Anything you don't mind me quoting."

"No. At the end everything she said was between us." He flashed a smile which betrayed no sense of loss whatsoever, then stabbed the earth with another fingertip. "What about you and Ch'tpok? We heard the two of you in there. We were surprised but happy for you. I hope you don't plan on including any of that in your playback."

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For a moment, just a moment, I felt like smacking him. Then I got his point: none of your business. It was a sentiment that never had much success among those of us employed in exporting the personal business of other people to the masses, but I'd rarely had it so skillfully thrown in my face.

He relented before I could figure out what to say next. "You want commentary? The Ballet's her commentary. She'll speak volumes there."

"Before she dies."

"Yes," he said. "Before she dies."

"Doesn't that bother you?"

For the first time in our association he showed a little human annoyance at being pricked about his bereavement. "Of course it does. But you people all focus on that aspect, like it's the only detail that matters. You don't see the performance that leads up to it. Or everything she'll leave behind when she's gone."

I couldn't resist pushing him a little further. "Like yourself, for instance."

He erased his meaningless dirt-drawing with a sweep of his hand, creating a fresh canvas, before starting again with another pattern of interlocking swirls. "You want commentary, Mr. Royko? All right. Here's your commentary. I'm going to mourn my wife. I'll miss her. But I'm just a person, you know. A little sack of bones and flesh. An organism with insight. The Ballet is something much larger."

I had already spent three days mingling with some of the freshest arrivals, and heard a lot of what sounded like pseudomystical profundity from kids desperate to justify the obsession that had swallowed their lives whole. I wiped perspiration from my forehead and asked him the question I'd asked them: "How?"

"Well. You know that the Ballet doesn't start fresh, every year? That each year's performance is actually a continuation of the performance from the year before? All going back thousands of years?"

That information had been provided by Isadora. "Yes."

"Well, it goes on from here, too. The role Shal plays this year affects what the next set of dancers have to do next year. And what the next set of dancers have to do the year after that. Come back ten thousand years from now, after watching every Ballet between now and then, and you'll

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be able to pick out some of the themes she introduced, some of the subroutines she helped evolve." He drew another set of lines over the first, eradicating the pattern he'd produced with another just as meaningless to my eyes. "It's complicated, but it all follows certain rules. Seen from the right viewpoint — the viewpoint of a future Vlhani, for instance — you're able to read not only the meaning of those movements, but also how they must have been developed. With enough patience, you'll be able to piece together the specific refinements of all the generations that came before...working your way back, one Ballet at a time...until at long last you reconstruct how they must have started with a single dancer very much like her, playing a part very much like hers." He drew a third pattern in the same patch of dirt, and said: "If you understood the Ballet at all, you would know just how intricate an epic it is — how every single dancer who ever played a part, in all of its thousands of years of history, was a vital participant in the choreography of all the years to come. And someday, when it reaches its conclusion, and accomplishes everything the Vlhani know it can do, everybody involved in its evolution will have been a part of something transcendent. That's not dying, Mr. Royko. That's a little bit like living forever."

I asked the question that haunted everybody who had ever seen the Vlhani dance. "But for what purpose?"

He turned toward me, making direct eye contact for the first time. I expected him to be devastated, possibly even torn to pieces by denial. What I saw in his eyes was far worse: a deep, abiding faith in the Ballet, and an equally overwhelming pity for me, the outsider who would always be unable to appreciate it.

He said, "I wish you had enough of a vocabulary to understand. I wish human speech provided me with enough of a vocabulary to explain it. I wish I could dance it, even once, just to show you. I wish I could work out all the problems and let everybody know what I see, just once. It's just...too goddamned important. Not just for them. But for everybody. Everywhere."

He spoke as a man who knew the world was burning and couldn't find anybody willing to listen to the warnings.

Maybe it was the moment. But I noticed something then that I hadn't noticed before: that we weren't alone after all. There were a pair of

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Vlhani a few hundred meters away, each standing still as distant from each other as they were from us. I didn't have to turn around to know that if I scanned the other direction I would probably find more. Sentries? Lookouts?

An Honor Guard?

My heart thumped. "Dalmo...why is Ch'tpok studying you? Why did she and Shalakan call you the dance? Why were those spiders making such a fuss over you, last night? Why do they think you're so special?"

He closed his eyes tight enough to make my own burn.

"Because I see it, Mr. Royko. Not just the little bits and pieces most of my fellow Pilgrims see...but all of it. Everything the dance means. Everything it's ever going to mean. Everything that has to be done to bring out its real potential. I just can't do enough to make it happen."

I struggled for words. "Shalakan said...something about her dance being your accomplishment, not hers. I almost thought that was just love talking...."

He shook his head. "Shal loved me for what I could give her."

"And you?"

"I loved her so much I let her have it."

He rose and walked into the desert, his right leg dragging. Partial paralysis, even now. Whatever he'd gained from the enhancements cost him the pleasure of walking with confidence. I considered going after him, lest he freeze up again, somewhere out of sight, and end up baking his brainpan beneath the heat of the broiling midday sun. Somehow, it seemed like a bad idea. He might have been a damaged thing who would never accomplish that which he'd changed himself to do — but for this moment, he had earned a few minutes away from my eyes.

It also occurred to me, too late, that my link was still off.

I hadn't archived a single damn word he'd said.

It was the first commandment drummed into the head of every neurec slinger: Don't Miss Anything. The turnoff option was a courtesy provided those occasional slingers who liked to have personal lives in between bouts of professional sensation, who may have wanted to eat meals or take shits or make love without the queasiness that comes from sharing the most intimate moments with millions of future voyeurs. Not all slingers used it; I knew a couple so burned out that they remained linked all their

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waking hours. I wasn't that far gone, fortunately — I liked being able to relate to people — but I was still pretty good about catching everything important. Missing the first conversation with the grieving, disabled husband was a professional gaffe of the highest order.

At the moment, I couldn't have cared less.

I returned to Ch'tpok, who had curled into a fetal position. (That was human, at least; I recalled reading somewhere that her adopted folks the Riirgaans grew their fetuses in straight lines.) The frown built into her face was even more pronounced now, but she looked peaceful anyway. I knelt beside her and put a hand on her shoulder.

She came awake with a nova-intensity smile. "Slinger Man."

"Riirgaan Lady," I said, brushing a strand of hair from her face. "Good morning."

"Is it morning?"

"Don't kill me for this, dear Chuppock, but it's more than morning. We overslept."

Her eyebrows knit tighter. "She's gone?"

"They both are."

A moment of discontinuity, as she processed that. "Dalmo too?"

"Yes."

She sat up in a hurry, clutching at the discarded clothing of the night before. "Goddammit, why didn't you tell me? You saw the way he is, you know he can't take care of himself! If he wanders too far, and freezes up again...."

I took her by the shoulders. "Not a chance. The Vlhani posted nursemaids. They know what he's worth."

She almost fought me, but then the message sank in, and she relaxed all at once, the panic giving way to a sadness so deep it almost qualified as mourning. I knew something else, then: something I'd already suspected but had not confirmed until now — that she loved him.

I hadn't invested any emotional permanence to our one night, but it still stung.

The angle of the sun seemed to change several degrees in the time it took her to face me. When she did, her eyes were defiant. "Do you understand how important he is?"

"Yes," I said. "I've seen it before."

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9.

Even neurec slingers have childhoods. Mine had been seventy-five light-years away, on a wheelworld called Eden.

You don't need to know the nasty details, but the place's name was false advertising of the cruelest kind. The owners didn't want it to be pleasant, or even livable — just survivable. The indentures who sold off the months and years of their lives in exchange for one-way passage there discovered that the promises of a better life were just empty propaganda, produced by backers less interested in the creation of a self-sustained community than they were in exploiting the trapped tenants of a one-factory town. Intended as a slum from the moment it was commissioned, it wasn't called Eden by the people who had to live and work there. I won't repeat the name they did use. I follow the promise I made to myself, on getting out, never to utter the epithet again.

But while I was still imprisoned there, believing I'd die a wasted old man at forty years Mercantile standard, chol was one of the few forms of recreation we had. It was an indigenous song style, performed a capella and produced so deep in the throat that one visitor who heard it for the first time characterized it as a unique form of musical wheeze. Chol compositions were short, but soulful; joyous, but filled with the desperation of the trapped; tonal, but as expressive as any combination of words. More conventional singing styles were sometimes used to add clarifying lyrics. It didn't happen often. Chol didn't really need it, and it wasn't a great idea, in any environment patrolled by company police, to let those in power know what the songs were actually about. It was enough that we knew, and that we were able to take comfort in giving our pain a voice.

Everybody I grew up with performed chol, if they were any good. Most weren't. But there was one kid who happened to be better than good. Better than genius. Better, even, than magical. The sounds that came out of him had no business coming out of a human being; they stretched not only what was physically possible to sing, but also what was emotionally possible to say. He used to climb up to the rafters in the dormitories where everybody our age was housed, position himself at the junction of two cross-beams, and improvise music that immediately called Time-Out on all the casual brutalities we inflicted upon each other the rest of the time.

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Sometimes he sang, too. He was not bad at that. But he was unparalleled at chol; it was an art form that existed nowhere else, and he had a gift for it. Even now, a lifetime away, I think about the sounds he made and I remain convinced that, had he escaped with his instrument intact, he would have been known forever.

Alas, one major risk of the industry we trained for was degenerative lung damage, and this kid got it early. It didn't kill him outright. But his windpipe coarsened, his air capacity shriveled, and he lost the sounds he was able to make earlier in youth. I stayed too long to prevent it from happening to him, and I died inside the night he tried to perform anyway, producing a series of gasps and squeaks all the more pathetic for its recognizable connection to the music he was determined to make. The music itself wasn't gone. He knew which notes he wanted to phrase. By any standard of raw talent, he was exactly as great as he had ever been. He was even greater, thanks to the pain that had tempered him and given him so much more to say. But he was not able to call any of it forth. The music was now forever trapped inside him, like any other clawed thing that could scar the walls of its cage but would never be able to rip its way free.

I wasn't that boy anymore. I was just the boy who had escaped, not to achieve freedom, but to avoid the pity of those who had known him.

And who knew enough to recognize Dalmo as part of the same sad fraternity.

Dalmo wasn't merely a vital participant, like Shalakan or Gabriel or even Isadora had been. He had come up with insights even the Vlhani themselves had never been able to produce. He understood the ultimate point of the Ballet, appreciated what it meant, and saw the purpose of this thing the Vlhani, and now their human acolytes, had spilled so much of their own blood trying to construct. He even knew the special contribution only he was gifted enough to make, the contribution that, to hear him say it, might bring this single evolving work of art to fruition...and it was all a waste; his limitless talent just refused to connect with the limited tools he'd been given to express it.

Da Vinci with his hands cut off is still da Vinci. Just da Vinci in hell.

And Dalmo possessed just enough ability to let the Vlhani and his fellow Pilgrims know it.

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10.

Even with what I'd been through in my own life, I still didn't appreciate just how much the obsession cost him. But I got an idea two hours later, when he returned pale, drawn, and shaking. Three Vlhani came with him, hovering like nurses worried about the well-being of a patient who shouldn't have been out of bed. He didn't look at them, but then he didn't really look at Ch'tpok and me, either. He faced us, even saw us, but gazed only at something behind us, greater than us, that loomed untold lifetimes away.

"That was a bad one," he murmured.

Ch'tpok moved right past the Vlhani bodyguards and braced him. "It's all right, Dal. I'm here."

"Are you? Are any of us? Do you have any idea what the Ballet has to say about what it means to be anywhere?" His knees buckled and the Vlhani surged forward to help Ch'tpok support his weight. They moved so quickly that my own impulse to catch him came after the others were well on their way to carrying him back inside. "I...oh, hell...oh, damn...."

I followed, feeling useless. The interior was now pretty crowded, with three Hom.Sap and three Vlhani; the spiders, who needed ample space for gesturing and were effectively gagged by the low ceiling, held their whips close, their heads bobbing about with the restlessness of hyperactive human children struggling to obey a parental Shut Up. Dalmo lay on the ground, his pain-wracked form speckled with desert sand. His legs writhed like angry snakes. He must have clawed Ch'tpok, who knelt beside him fumbling with sedatives from her kit. I don't know how she could even see with that angry gash in her forehead oozing scarlet into her eyes. As for me, I did the only thing neurec slingers have ever been equipped to do: I stood there and watched.

He spotted me, though. "Mr. Royko! Are you there?"

I didn't move. "Yes, Dalmo. I'm here."

"I loved her! Do you see that, Mr. Royko? Do you believe me?"

I might have hesitated if not for Ch'tpok's eyes, beseeching me as Vlhani arms held Dalmo down. "Yes. I believe you."

"Then come to the Ballet! Make sure you watch!"

It was an unnecessary promise; Shalakan's dance was after all a major

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part of the spectacle I'd traveled so far to capture. But even if Dalmo hadn't been convulsing with the need to hear the actual words, Ch'tpok's eyes raged just as hot. I gave the answer they wanted. "I'll watch, Dalmo. I promise."

She put him down. He sank to the cube floor, his arms and legs unfurling like banners robbed of all motivating wind. The Vlhani bobbed over him, tapped their big black heads together in a gesture that might have been their equivalent of a distraught group hug, then moved past me to the exit.

Ch'tpok held Dalmo's head in her lap and sang. I can only suppose that's what she was doing, since the sound itself was more Riirgaan than human. It bubbled with glottal stops and atonal whistles, and was beautiful enough, though few human audiences would have been able to discern a lullaby.

It had the desired effect, because once his eyes closed he seemed to have found some kind of peace. It was a temporary peace, and the last I would ever see him have, but it was there nevertheless.

It was not at all reflected by the loss I saw in Ch'tpok's eyes.

She murmured, "God damn it."

Thinking of chol, I said: "Yeah. God damn it."

We may have been tired of using it, but sometimes no other phrase will do.

I watched her tend to him for maybe twenty minutes. Then I went outside and used my pocket hytex to signal the Riirgaan Embassy for a ride back. The skimmer arrived while Ch'tpok was still inside with Dalmo. I hopped aboard and left without saying good-bye, already thinking of the show to come.

11.

This year's Vlhani Ballet came together in the same natural amphitheater that had hosted millennia of ballets before it. The hundred thousand chosen Vlhani swarmed out of the hills. The entire landscape turned black from them, the world dappling from the sunlight that reflected off their great mirrored heads. Avoiding only the northern rim, where the diplomats and observers from seven separate offworld species

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traditionally gathered to watch, they approached from every other compass point at once, moving in clean orderly sweeps over the edge and toward the killing ground where so many before them had died. Some stayed behind on the southern rim, as eager to watch as we were. Between them, millions of serpentine whips twirled above their heads in the kind of gestures that might have been prayers and might have been their equivalent of the excruciatingly banal small talk that has always dominated the last conversations before long-anticipated ceremonies.

They took their positions, milled about in the seeming chaos that Riirgaan exolinguists called the Primary Ascension, then began to move faster. Black heads bobbed up and down like bubbles floating on a sea of writhing snakes, only to descend again, beneath carpets of intertwined black whips caressing each other in ebony knots. The dancers came together, separated, leaped into the sky in waves, slowed down just long enough to provide contrast, then sped up, becoming blurs, turning the performance into a blur of undifferentiated motion. There were times when all of them were synchronized, times when they seemed about as well-organized as a riot, and times when all of the dancers made enough room for a single Vlhani to step forward and punctuate the performance with a solo that elaborated on themes visible in the Ballet as a whole.

It turned out to be one of the longest Ballets the Vlhani had given in recorded history. Some had lasted only a few hours, others a couple of days. This one was epic. It went on longer than any normal human spectator could have been expected to follow it. Even those offworlders known for their endurance had trouble staying for the whole thing. My fellow Hom.Saps, the naked Ambassador Croyd included, all attended in dour shifts. The Riirgaans came and went with enthusiasm, seeing nothing but beauty even as the first few deaths bloodied the floor of the valley below. Among the organics, the Tchi probably stayed awake longest, but they were so busy complaining about the lack of discernment on the part of the other delegations that they probably saw nothing at all. Only the hovering AIsource flatscreens stayed for the whole thing, recording billions of nano-movements in precisely detailed increments.

The limitations of human observation being what they are, most of the neural records provided at the time were fragmentary. They had to be pieced together, and well supplemented with AIsource data and the far

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more inclusive holos taken by the instruments the various offworlders traditionally set up around the site. Nobody saw it all, even if they were destined to spend years picking it apart.

I stayed for the whole thing.

It was an enhancement I'd been provided by the linkcaster. Strictly temporary, good for one-time only: an implant that cleansed blood toxins and divorced me from any need for sleep for the entirety of the seven days it took this year's dance to progress from first step to last death. I couldn't see everything, of course; no human mind, enhanced or not, could follow everything that happened on that one teeming stage. But I took in as much of it as any one person could, following not only the show before me but also the reactions of the various diplomats behind me.

I followed Shalakan's performance with special interest; she threaded in and out of everything that happened around her with an elegance that tried but failed to transcend the terrible, scarlet moment when the whips of her dance partners sectioned her into pieces. Too much has been written about how beautiful she was during that performance: the same things that were written the first year when Isadora fell, and would be written the next year when Melaniherz fell. If you want to know what it felt like to watch her die, you don't have to ask me. My neurec's still available for those who need to isolate the moment when one more piece of my soul chipped off and died. The bit analysis is available for those who want the moment-by-moment coverage.

No, I want to talk about the part that came after that, which few people noticed. The part that you don't know about because it got edited out; the part that should have been the real story.

12.

It happened on the southern rim, opposite the vantage point traditionally taken by offworld spectators, among the sizable gathering of Vlhani who had come to this place to watch their brethren struggle and dance and die. There was usually a large number of Dance Pilgrims among them as well, but they had moved away over the past few hours, either retreating into the desert or drifting to other outlooks along the rim. Their exodus had been so gradual that, in the face of the far more spectacular show

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taking place down below, nobody had noticed the stage being set for a sideshow. Few saw it even when one row of Vlhani all lined up side by side, each extending a pair of long black whips in a gesture that reminded me of a formal salute. The whips all came down and stabbed the dirt together, forming a barrier which almost immediately rose to reveal a single human form, emerging from their midst.

I had been alone for the majority of the Ballet. That was good. Paying attention was my job. Distractions would have marred the playback. But Ch'tpok, who I hadn't seen since the failed interview in the desert, now sought me out, snuck up behind me, and whispered in my ear: "Now."

I heard her voice but couldn't afford to turn around to see her. The recording would have been damaged.

I understood why she said it. She wanted to make sure I knew he was starting. But the reminder was unnecessary. I'd been waiting for this. I took the rangeviewers from my jacket pocket and watched the scene at full magnification.

It was a man, pale, naked, trembling, and not extraordinary in any way. He limped, dragging one leg, hardly seeming to notice as the Vlhani parted before him. He had eyes for nothing but the dirt.

When he reached the circle of open ground they had reserved for him, he just stood there, blinking, as if lost in their adulation.

His arms extended. He spread them wide, as if claiming the whole universe above him. He arched back, doubling over, making a knot of himself. He drew himself in, wrapping himself tight, forming a little personal universe with himself as its own citizen. He seemed capable of shrinking still further, retreating so far that he became a singularity, about to disappear in a single dot of compressed misery.

Then he uncurled, opening himself up, turning his back on wherever he had been a few short seconds before. He kept this up a long time, longer than just the increased flexibility of a Dance Pilgrim should have permitted. He made it seem that, however much he uncurled, however tall he managed to stand, there was still a part of himself huddled in the dirt. He bloomed and he continued to bloom and he made it a drive that would never be satisfied, and he did this in the midst of hundreds of Vlhani who for that moment all seemed willing to defer to him. And then he raised his pale ribbonlike arms and allowed the opening movements of his great

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unperformed dance to ripple down those arms in the sine waves that have always been the densest form of Vlhani communication.

It would be nice to report that his dance was brilliant, that in these hours after the death of his wife, his heartbreak allowed him to overcome all of his physical limitations and give a performance that dwarfed anything taking place in the amphitheater below.

I would like to report that because for those few minutes at least, it actually seemed about to happen.

I would like to report it happened because it's what I was hoping would happen.

But the grace he showed was fleeting, the brilliance he demonstrated was pretty much all untapped potential, and the masterpiece he seemed about to perform never took place.

Instead, his limitations came back into play. He froze in mid-gesture. Paralyzed, imprisoned by the moment, probably screaming silent frustration at the mutiny of his nervous system, he stood in place, his body contorted, his eulogy undelivered.

The tableau lasted for an endless few seconds before the Vlhani nearest him surged forward, shielding him from view, mercifully drawing the curtain with their own bodies.

I don't think any of the other observers paid the incident any special notice.

The rest of the Ballet lasted forever. One hundred thousand marionettes and one altered human woman died for no cause I could fathom. Conscious of my responsibilities toward my audience, I willed myself to feel the glory. I'm told I was persuasive. Nobody enjoying the playback ever complained about my lack of sincerity.

When the Ballet was over, Ch'tpok was gone.

13.

The aftermath, on the offworlder side, was always the same in those days. The Riirgaans and the Bursteeni and the Tchi all scurried off to their embassies, to pore over the playback, in the vain hope that their translation programs had succeeded in furthering their understanding another percentile point or two. The Hom.Sap analysts did much the same, though

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not without muttering about the loss of another human life. The AIsource flitted about making no pronouncements at all, releasing no information beyond a strict accounting of the volume of data retrieved. Many representatives of many races expressed awe at the beauty they had seen. Some pretended understanding. Nobody produced an actual explanation.

I forwarded my file to the network via hytex, hitched a ride back to the human compound, found an unclaimed bunk in the common room, and slept for fourteen hours.

Giving Ambassador Croyd all due credit, he waited until I woke naturally before having his two largest and most intimidating aides drag me to his office. They weren't very large and were way too soft at the edges to be intimidating: call them faux-thugs. There wasn't room for three on the tiny couch, but they still sat down on either side of me, their elbows resting against invisible notches in my ribs in a laughable effort to rattle my personal space. Croyd sat on the opposite side of his desk, his eyes red and shadowed, his shock of white hair now a wild starburst. Not only was he still naked, but he'd had something bready to eat recently: I could tell from the crumbs scattered in his thatches of chest hair. He tapped a drumbeat against the top of the desk, waiting for me to break the silence first.

When I didn't, he said: "I had a friend in the first embassy to Vlhan. The one the spiders attacked when my predecessor tried to keep Isadora out of the Ballet. He said that the dirt was muddy with blood, that there were some people torn into so many pieces that the cleanup detail had to freeze the parts in cryofoam cubes. After that, he gave up thinking that the Ballet was art. He called it a mass suicide and wished only that there was something he could do to get every single Vlhani to participate at once."

I said nothing.

"She died horribly. She was torn to pieces. And all over Confederate Space, morons with nothing better to do are patching into your neurec, thinking they can see something beautiful and profound in that. Some will want to follow where she led. No doubt one or two will even die the way she died. Does that bother you at all, Royko? Even a little?"

I tried to speak, found my throat too dry to make a sound. After a moment I managed it. "A little."

"Too bad," he said. "That's not nearly enough to qualify as human.

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You're still a vampire. Did you find out anything about the enhancements?"

"No."

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing," I said.

He might have pressed it, but then he lowered his weary eyes and made a dismissive gesture at the two faux-thugs, too fed up the night after such a bloodletting to continue with the empty charade of personal fearsomeness. They rose on either side of me with such smooth simultaneity that there might have been an invisible string connecting them, and strolled out the door together. Croyd watched their backs recede with all the sadness of a man watching the departure of the only two friends he had in this world. When the door closed behind them, he shook his head. "You have colluded with a great evil, but there's no law against that on this world, so here's the best I can do. You'll be transporting out of here in seven days. Between now and then I don't want to see you, I don't want to hear you, and I sure as hell don't want to smell you. You will not receive any amenities from my staff beyond the bare minimum necessary to support your worthless life, and then you will get the hell out of here and never come back. Does that leave you with any questions?"

All my instincts warned to say nothing.

There was no reason to say anything, anyway. I'd sent my recording off. I had finished the assignment. I had no official remaining interest in the madness of everyday life on Vlhan.

So I rose from the couch and headed toward the door. But something stopped me just before I left — a sense of questions unanswered, business unfinished — and I found myself turning to face the Ambassador's glare once again. "Sir...what do you know about a woman named Ch'tpok?"

He looked surprised. "That Riirgaan girl who was doing the study on Shalakan?"

"Yes. Except she's human, not Riirgaan."

His surprise turned to annoyance. "You know who I mean. What about her?"

"Tell me what you know."

He next tried dubiousness on for size. "Are you attracted to her, Royko? Is this supposed to be a dating service I'm running here?"

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I waited.

Ultimately, he sighed. "If you've met her, you know almost everything we do. Her family defected a long time ago, over some piddling political reason or another. Then they defected from Riirgaan too, leaving her there to grow up with the lizards. From what I understand, she went through their education system, their coming-of-age rituals, their religious instruction, even this sort of sexless ritual marriage thing they do, and is quite open about believing in none of it. Their Ambassador, Hurrr'poth, considers her the Riirgaan equivalent of an adopted daughter. We've offered to repatriate, but she says she's not interested. Told me, the time we met, that she prefers her biological species from the outside; says we're more entertaining that way. Even chittered that annoying laugh the Riirgaans have. And why did I waste even that much time out of my day telling you this?"

"Because I need to talk to her again," I said.

He stared at me, not knowing how to read what he saw.

Then he scowled. "I don't like you, Royko. I'm not interested in your infatuations. I just want you off this world as soon as possible."

He was right, of course. I had nothing more to say to her, or to Dalmo.

But finding them still required less than a day.

14.

The Riirgaans had established their embassy by a lake in one of the wispy, ethereal forests that dotted Vlhan's temperate zone, a place as quiet as an unspoken thought that nevertheless constantly teased the eye with tiny flying things that darted from one hiding place to the next whenever they imagined themselves unobserved. The air was cool and misty, the cabins of the Riirgaan rustic in style but far too sturdy to have anything to do with the region's fragile wood. The embassy personnel drifted from cabin to cabin in twos and threes, chittering away in a variety of languages ranging from their own to Hom.Sap Mercantile; they noticed my arrival, in a skimmer I'd borrowed from a contact among the Bursteeni, but only one changed his routines to investigate me.

That one led me to their Ambassador Hurrr'poth, who gave me certain things I needed and had me escorted to their on-site hospital

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facility, and a certain bright green room where I found two figures lying in utter silence.

Ch'tpok lay curled on a mattress that had curled into a crescent to mimic the position of her body. Her eyebrows were knit with that special species of worry that occurs only in troubled sleep.

The object of her dreams drifted on his back on the surface of a flotation pool, staring open-eyed at the ceiling. The proportions of his arms and legs were uneven, but close to mainline human; a sign of his enhanced anatomy, contracting to the positions it assumed at rest.

I wanted to wake Ch'tpok, but Dalmo sensed my presence first. His eyes twitched. "Don't disturb her. She needs her rest; she's been fussing over me all day."

The Riirgaans had provided me with a stool capable of housing the Hom.Sap posterior. Carrying it in, I parked myself beside the pool and looked down at Dalmo. "She cares about you."

Dalmo's body twitched and bobbed, forming ripples in the amber liquid. "No. She's like Shalakan. She cares about the Dance."

Was that bitterness? "You're also a man."

Were he not paralyzed, he might have shrugged; he managed to express the gesture with an eye-twitch. "I sometimes think so. I sometimes wish not."

There was nothing I could say to that.

We remained silent for a while, listening to the ripples in the flotation tank and the whispering rasp of Ch'tpok's breath. Then he said: "I wanted to dance for Shalakan. I wanted to pay tribute to her. I froze up. I fell mute."

"The message got through," I assured him.

"Don't humor me!" he said.

"I'm not. It looked good."

"You're blind," he said.

More silence.

And then: "You know, Shalakan and I met in surgery. Not before or after our surgery. Not in recovery from our surgery. During our surgery."

"You mean, while getting your enhancements?"

A wry, if lopsided grin. "I'm not about to tell you who did it, or where it was done. I can't, you know. Silence on the subject is one of the changes they built in."

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"Tell me what you can."

He coughed, without really needing to; enhanced lungs knew no congestion. It was just the delaying tactic of a man trying to put off what needed to be said. "You have to imagine what it was like. I was just a strange, lonely kid who thought he saw something in a pirated neurec of the Ballet, and was so driven by that understanding that I was willing to reinvent myself to become part of it. Contacting the Engineers was easy. They found me. But nobody told me how much the change would cost."

"What did it cost, Dalmo?"

"The body has to be rebuilt, practically cell by cell. The nervous system has to be rewired, given a new race memory. I won't insult you or the Ballet by saying how much pain is involved. But it takes two full Mercantile years, with the machines working on you every moment. You're only pieces for most of it. And you're awake throughout; you need a normal sleep cycle for the neural restructuring to take. The Engineers understand that human beings need company to endure it. Shalakan and I were given each other."

I tried to comprehend what it must have been like. "That must have been a comfort."

He was far away, now, reliving the tortures of a time now dead. "No. I was too weak. From the first day I screamed for it to stop. She was the strong one. She only screamed some of the time. She told me she loved me before I could speak a single sane word. But by the time I was able to give her anything, I loved her too. It was the only thing that got us through the recovery. That and talking about the Ballet. Which we both knew would always be far more important to both of us than we could ever be to each other."

They were words that should have been drowned in tears, but his eyes remained dry. I leaned in close: "And then?"

"You know what then. She proved more compatible. She became a dancer. I became," he groped for a phrase, "a marionette with tangled strings."

"But she still stayed with you, Dalmo."

"She had to. Because while she had the physical ability...her understanding of the Ballet itself was only mediocre. She didn't meet Vlhani standards. She didn't have the right insights. Without me, there would

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have been no chance of her ever being chosen." He closed his eyes, keeping them shut for so long that I wondered if he'd fallen asleep. Then he spoke again, his words even softer than they'd been before; "So I taught her."

It was a good thing my neurec had already been sent to the publisher, because the weight of what I'd just been told might have burned out the playback. The blood pounding in my ears, I said: "What?"

"The only woman I've ever loved. Probably the only woman I ever will love. And I'll never be sure she really loved me, because we spent years giving her everything she needed in order to leave me." His eyes popped open and stared at the ceiling again. They were not quite aligned with each other, the way human eyes ought to be, with the one on the left trying hard to retreat beneath a droopy lid. Neither seemed to see me at all. He whispered: "If I didn't know what the Ballet is for, I'd hate it. If I didn't know what I still have left to do, I'd kill myself. But I don't have those options." His words became thick, sludgy. "Art speaks to art, Mr. Royko. The Ballet will never be complete if what I know stays in my head. I have to find another way. Get enhanced again. Changed again. And again after that. Make them invent the right procedures for me, if they have to. Anything that's necessary. It's that important."

"And Ch'tpok?"

"It's not love. At least not for me. But she's still the one who'll get me where I need to go."

I thought about waking her. I thought about dragging her off the amoeboid mattress and hauling her away from this literally damned man before she was forced to pay a price as great as he had paid. I wrote ten separate scripts for the eloquent things I could have said to make her see reason. But she was a Riirgaan who only happened to look human; I was a neurec slinger whose feelings were his stock in trade; and we were both on Vlhan, where sacrificing yourself to the cause of the great Ballet was not a sick abnormality but a religious calling.

Call it cowardice. Call it sympathy from a crippled artist who knew exactly how Dalmo felt. Call it even the curse of a neurec slinger, so accustomed to experiencing life as a spectator that concrete action of any kind requires more will than I had.

But once again I turned my back without speaking. I left the room, and Vlhan, and did not see her again for ten years Hom.Sap Mercantile.

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15.

They were the ten busiest years of my professional life.

I traveled from system to system, covering the empathy drought, the search for the beast Magrison, the unveiling of the Michelard Colossus, the riot at the latest Vossoff funeral, even the banquet held at a house of an unremarkable old Hom.Sap couple worshipped by a cult of interstellar cargo loaders. I saw all the things I was supposed to see and felt all the things I was supposed to feel and even made myself a little reputation for the intensity of my coverage, which didn't quite make up for the sensation of dying inside, one piece at a time, as it came to mean less and less.

I didn't go out of my way to follow developments on Vlhan. It was, after all, a place I'd visited for less than two weeks, covering one story out of many — even if it happened to be one story that sometimes left me gasping after dreams I barely remembered.

But you couldn't live in Hom.Sap civilization without hearing more about the Ballet. It remained a sensation, despite the Confederacy's efforts to paint it as a monstrosity. The source of the Pilgrim enhancements remained a mystery despite the entire system treasuries the Confederacy poured into tracking down those responsible. The neurecs went on-line, the analyses flew back and forth by hytex, the human dancers who participated became celebrities and then gods. There were novels and vids about star-crossed romances with the Ballet as a backdrop, even a few that told the tale of Shalakan in terms that substituted sensation for insight. (Two of those theorized that she had survived somehow, and set up housekeeping with Isadora and Melaniherz and all the dancers who came before and after, none of whom died as we had seen them die; the fictitious bungalow grew awfully crowded by the time the number of humans approved for the Ballet exceeded a dozen per performance.)

I felt a chill the year the Dance Pilgrims training on Vlhan exceeded one million. Few of those were ever chosen for the performance, of course, but the Confederacy still cried genocide the first and only year more than a thousand humans danced and died. By then the celebrity phase of the movement was over, of course. By then the humans were almost as faceless in their numbers as the Vlhani.

The updates on Dalmo arrived without my invitation, waiting for me

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at every new destination. I heard when he married again, to Moralia, a second Pilgrim woman who also used his help to qualify for the Ballet. I heard when she died. I heard when he became a teacher guiding other chosen toward their own final performances. I heard when he disappeared, and when he returned to Vlhan with even more radical enhancements, intended to take him closer to the time when he'd be able to join the Ballet himself. The holo I have of him as he appeared at that time shows an emaciated male torso that sprouts half a dozen long black whips uncompromised by any resemblance to human arms and legs. The face is Dalmo's, but it's slack-jawed, heavy-lidded, idiot in its lack of emotional affect. The whips move in painful spasms, occasionally leavened by grace. The Vlhani surrounding him move with such comparative ease that they're like giants, unwittingly mocking the clumsy visitor on stilts. Ch'tpok's there, too: a shadowy observer in their midst, absorbing everything she sees with inscrutable rapture.

I never liked the updates. As a slinger I saw more than my share of tragedy, but the Dalmo updates felt different: like dispatches in the evolution of a skimmer crash occurring before me in slow motion.

Still, I might have spent my entire life going from disaster to disaster, feeling none of them, never stirring myself to a moment of genuine participation...were it not for the summons that called me back.

It didn't come from Ch'tpok. I was about forty light-years away, returning from a sensational murder case involving defendants of four separate species, and a victim who remained conscious despite passing all of the clinical definitions of death, when my sponsors diverted my latest transport to Vlhan. They wanted me to cover Rafael, a young man whose charm and magnetism and passion for the Vlhani Ballet had rendered him the first Chosen dancer to capture the imagination of the Hom.Sap public in three years Mercantile. And while I did my job, and spoke to him and watched him perform and saw him die, he was not the real story any more than Shalakan had been.

16.

The growing Pilgrim city known as Nureyev occupied a stark expanse of shoreline between one of Vlhan's many deserts and one of its rarer

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freshwater seas. Why the Pilgrims had chosen that particular spot for their promised land was anybody's guess. Maybe the Vlhani themselves dictated the site. Or maybe, like most fanatics, the Pilgrims believed they could ennoble their cause with suffering.

Established soon after Isadora's dance as a handful of ragged tents, huddled defiantly against both the dry desert winds and the diplomatic firestorms that had greeted their arrival, Nureyev had grown into a boom town, with many square kilometers of cramped cubehouses arrayed in as disorganized a grid as possible. There were still a few battered tents scattered around the perimeter, a phenomenon common to many frontiers that attract new citizens faster than the old can be housed. It was in no way a self-sufficient community; the Pilgrims grew only a little food and produced even fewer goods, surviving mostly on the support of the various alien embassies who continued to supply them with staples (despite the Hom.Sap Confederacy's increasingly shrill protests that this only encouraged more Pilgrims to show up).

There were about eighty thousand Hom.Saps in Nureyev, most of them enhanced. There was also always a scattering of aliens, visiting from their respective delegations, sometimes mingling with each other, sometimes keeping to themselves, always observing the mysteries of Vlhan with a fascination that transcended species.

And Vlhani, of course. Whether alone or in groups, they moved among their followers with the self-assurance of gods on daily errands. Or if not gods, then something else: for as my skimmer banked over the central marketplace, the thousands of undulating whips on display resembled nothing so much as an inferno of writhing snakes.

Ch'tpok was, as promised, waiting at a table outside one of Nureyev's slapdash bars. Years of desert conditions, without compensatory rejuvenation by AIsource Medical, had aged her more than time could have. She was grayer, browner, more leathery about the eyes. She wore battered old Hom.Sap gear instead of the Riirgaan uniform she'd affected years ago. The frown built into her features now looked more like a scowl. But the weariness lightened when she saw me, and she flashed the same dazzling smile I remembered from so long ago. She didn't stand to greet me, but instead just raised her beer in a salute. "Mr. Royko. Been a lot of years."

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"Not so many you can't still call me Paul," I said, as I took the seat opposite hers.

"Um," she said. "I did call you Paul, didn't I?"

"For a while," I said.

"I remember," she said, and for a moment we both smiled. "You know, you made the best recording that day. Some of the young ones, Pilgrims I mean, tell me how inspiring they found it."

My expression must have been complicated. "Thank you."

"I'll call you Paul."

"And I'm still willing to try to pronounce Chuppock."

Her eyes darkened, lowered, and found something intensely interesting to study on the surface of her beer. The moment was fleeting, though; before the clouds had a chance to gather the sunlight broke through, revealing a determined cheer that must have taken her some effort to maintain. "My," she said. "We really have been out of touch for a while, haven't we? — That's not my name anymore. A while back I had a misunderstanding with my adopted species and was forced to renounce my affiliation."

That was a stunner. "You're not Riirgaan anymore?"

"Never was," she said, taking dark enjoyment in my reaction.

"I mean, legally. What are you, Hom.Sap now?"

"Wish I could say I was; it would be awfully convenient sometimes." There was another flash of darkness, dispelled just as quickly. "No. The Confederacy said it wouldn't let me reclaim Hom.Sap citizenship without first making a public statement renouncing my support for the Ballet. So I'm legally nothing."

I thought of what it must have been like to have no home, not even in theory; to have fewer rights than a representative of a species not yet judged Sentient or Animal; to have the closest thing to a consensus government in a thousand human worlds decide that the entire race would turn its back on her.

My reaction must have shown on my face, because she laughed out loud. "Don't look so damn stricken. People have been without countries before. And while I may not have rights anywhere else, the Vlhani don't care about stupid concepts like citizenship and species loyalty."

It was still exile, and it had taken more out of her than she evidently liked to pretend, but I declined to say so. "What can I call you?"

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She made a Vlhani gesture, her right arm looping around itself in an uneven spiral. The move was lyrical, beautiful, and so fleeting that until she repeated it twice I wasn't sure I'd seen it at all. "That's what they call me."

Damn. She'd obtained enhancements of her own. I wondered if she harbored any dreams of giving her life for the Ballet, and felt a pang at the idea: as brief as our past encounter had been, I still remembered her with too much fondness to wish such an end for her. Wanting to protest, I tried to imitate her new name with a flappy arm movement and failed.

Another grin. "Call me Chuppock, if you must. This time it can even be the correct pronounciation."

"All right," I said. "Chuppock."

The pause between us lasted as long as some entire Vlhani Ballets, with nothing filling it except for mutual anticipation. A number of marionettes and Pilgrims passed by, limbs flailing in communication many times more frenzied but not any more articulate than our silence. There were any number of things I could have said to break the moment, but I just asked, "Where is he, Chuppock?"

She looked away, studied the rough wood surface of the table, and drummed her fingertips against the grain. "Is it just for a story, or do you really want to know?"

My answer was no answer at all. "What do you think?"

I wouldn't have blamed her for refusing to tell me. We really didn't know each other well, and the media have been disregarding pledges of secrecy since before the bygone era of paper.

But if there was one thing that personified all questions about the Vlhani Ballet, it was the genuine need to know...and if there was one thing that characterized humanity it was the equal, and compensatory, need to tell.

After a long time, she said: "Dalmo always said he'd see you again."

17.

The clinic was dim and humid and filled with a smoky something that wasn't exactly breathable but didn't have the courtesy to suffocate you either. The walls echoed with the cries of other patients, some of which

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sounded human enough but made no coherent sense. All of those interred here had been damaged beyond repair by the enhancement technology; none had any hope of getting better.

The figure in the hammock was the worst. Neither Vlhani nor human nor the hybrid Pilgrim enhancements were meant to achieve, he was just a failure, twitching and writhing from his inability to achieve any of those lost but exalted states.

The torso I'd seen in the holo was gone. It had been simplified, streamlined, reduced to a knotty cable that might have begun existence as a human spinal column. Bags of moist something clung to the cable by straps. So did a human head, still recognizable as the man I'd met, but robbed of his passion and intelligence. Even the eyes were blind, clouded. I would have thought him brain-dead were it not for the hovering AIsource monitor busily translating every neural jolt into screens of data.

Behind me, Ch'tpok said: "They kept trying. They never did it for anybody else, but they kept taking him back to try again. Six, seven stages already: all making him a little less human, all in search of a system capable of expressing the choreography locked inside his head."

It was monstrous. It made me want to vomit. I choked: "And he wants it this way?"

"He isn't driven by what he wants," she said. "He's driven by what he needs to do."

I moved closer to the damaged creature in the hammock, not knowing what to say, not knowing what to think. I felt horror, awe, repugnance, amazement, and for a moment, the ghost of another feeling I couldn't identify. Retrospect, much later on, allowed me to identify that feeling as understanding. Maybe my own exposure to the Ballet had given me some awareness of the Vlhani plan; maybe I couldn't tell what that plan was all about but still understood that it was about something. Maybe my first glimpse of what Dalmo had become gave me some sense of progress toward the realization of what they wanted.

Or maybe it was just plain pity for the idiot who had damned himself to hell for a belief. "Can I talk to him?"

"He doesn't make much sense these days. But the monitor will translate." She spoke up: "Amplify, please."

The flatscreen obliged, flashing the words in Hom.Sap Mercantile

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while simultaneously speaking the words in a simulation of Dalmo's voice: "Dance. Future. Dance. Time. Heat. Vlhani. Dance. Spin. Leap. Dance. Death. Life. Dance. Hate. Danger. Death. Time. Dance. Love. Dance. Ch'tpok. Dance. Fear. Fear. Pain. Dance. More. Dance." It went on like that, the only pattern frequent repetition of the word "Dance." The tone was insistent, even desperate, underlaid with the kind of irritation that comes with explaining something to somebody too stupid to get it.

Ch'tpok said, "That's in Mercantile, of course. It doesn't have enough of a common vocabulary to express what Dalmo's getting at. Unfortunately, there's not much more for those of us who understand the dance. We play the neurecs and get something useful to the Vlhani once every three or four days."

"Is that enough?"

"No," she said. "He needs to move. He won't be able to do much the way he is now."

"Meaning more enhancements," I said.

"Another generation. Maybe two. Yes."

I could see it, then: more years in torment, more disfigurement, more pain and exile. Was it even something he was still capable of wanting? Or were Ch'tpok, and whoever else she included in the mysterious "We," just torturing a lost soul whose potential, if any, had been lost several operations back? I opened my mouth to ask, realized while still forming the question that there was no way to phrase it without striking the barrier called faith, and shut my mouth, feeling trapped.

She seemed unsurprised. "You don't believe I love him?"

I turned, to confront eyes glowing with conviction. "I believe you love what you think he is. I don't know if that means doing what's best for him."

"Unfortunately," she said, her smile becoming downright broad, "we can't all meet here in a few thousand years, take a look around us, and know who was right."

"No," I said. "We can't."

She took me by the wrist and led me down the stinking corridor, past an array of other failed Pilgrims in other states of degeneration. I allowed myself to be pulled along less out of faith that she'd take me someplace meaningful, than hope she'd take me away from so much wasted pain. She

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brought me outside and she led me across a bright sunlit plain to a sleepcube much like the one where I'd found her so long ago.

This one was empty but for a neural playback unit. She sat me down beside it, plugged me in, and placed a hand on my shoulder. "Paul? Do you remember, a long time ago, I told you about the Riirgaan darrr'pakh?"

There were many things she'd spoken to me about, that were now lost; but that particular detail had stuck. "Yes."

"Well, mine said something to me, once, not long after I accepted that I'd never learn what he had to teach. He said that no piece of paper can bear words unless it's the right color to provide contrast with the ink. He said that just because the human mind was incompatible with his particular curriculum didn't keep it from being receptive to other things. Even harder things." She took a deep breath, and gave the machine a glance that suggested she resented it. "Dalmo said that you'd understand. He said that if you ever came back I would have to show this to you."

I stared at the playback leads. "What?"

"Art," she said. "Speaking to art. A little gift from him to you."

I might have hesitated.

But then I plugged in —

18.

It was a recording of chol.

The neurec had been made by a genius at the peak of his abilities, capturing another whose sounds should have been entirely alien to any concerns involving the Vlhani Ballet. I had no idea how Dalmo knew that they would speak to me, or how he commissioned the performance. I can only say that the voice I heard was infinitely greater than I had been even on the best day of my life, that the tears sprung from my eyes within the first few notes, and that by the time I calmed down enough to listen I had discovered it was possible to miss hell if hell was the place where you were at your best.

And one other thing.

For the duration of that song, at least, I understood everything the Vlhani had been trying to express. I saw what Isadora and Shalakan and Dalmo had seen, what the Pilgrims were desperate to create, what lesser

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visionaries like Ch'tpok and myself could appreciate only in fragments. I saw the millennia of Ballet performances as a single unified whole, creating a single, complex, exhaustively annotated image. I saw what the image conveyed and I knew why the message had to be delivered and I understood why the Vlhani and all the humans who had begun to join them felt their own lives of minor consequence in the face of the ways everything would change upon the day of the final performance. I saw who in power harbored the secrets of the enhancement engineers and I saw how those secrets were being kept and I understood the great colossal joke that was being played on the Confederate Dip Corps and its futile ambition to shut the Ballet down.

I saw all this and for a few moments I persuaded myself that I could use this knowledge to blackmail the engineers into inflicting their enhancements upon me, so I could dance where all those others had danced before me. But that urge lasted less than a second. Almost as soon as it struck I knew that it was impossible. Even if I endured the surgeries, I didn't have what Dalmo had, or what Shalakan had. I didn't even have what Ch'tpok had. I could hear the music, for now — even if, like most complex melodies, its precise structure would no doubt fade from memory the second I stopped listening — but I would never be able to play the song.

It was a feeling I had felt before, upon losing chol.

The performance built to a crescendo. I saw the final Ballet, being performed on a Vlhani plain more than ten thousand years from now. It involved every single Vlhani alive at that time, gathered together from horizon to horizon, giving their all for the climax of the performance that had consumed their racial history. I saw, not thousands, but millions of altered humans among them. I sensed others, too far away for me to see: entire civilized worlds which had dedicated their entire populations to dancing these last few moments. I saw no indication that anybody would die in this last performance. I sensed only what all those sentients sensed as they raised their limbs for the last flourish.

And one other thing:

I saw that the Vlhani conception was flawed. That they were flailing about in a vacuum. That they'd never accomplish what they wanted to accomplish unless Dalmo pointed the way for them.

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Why a human? Since it made no sense for a human to be able to accomplish what creatures evolved for this dance could not?

I saw the reason for that, too.

And it was the only part that frightened me.

As the song ended, I found myself on my hands and knees, shaking. Ch'tpok had her enhanced arms curled around me in a sort of harness, holding me tightly and murmuring soft reassurances as I passed through the various stages of hysteria.

I said, "Thousands of years." Destroyed that I'd never see it. "Thousands."

Ch'tpok held me, and kissed me on the back on the neck. "But we'll get him there."

We, I thought. And knew it was true.

I would never dance.

But the rest of my life would be about making that final dance happen.

19.

Travel to a certain isolated plateau, in the southern hemisphere of the planet Vlhan, and you'll find the statue: a representation of a lone Vlhani, its whips contorted in expansive, frozen curls.

You'll wonder what it signifies, and you'll decide that it means nothing. After all, Vlhani Dance requires movement. A static moment like this means nothing to them, without the choreography that carries one position to the next. It's realistic enough, even lifelike, but utterly without meaning, to anybody interested in decoding the great Vlhani Ballet.

Chances are that you'll describe it a curiosity and walk away.

Chances are that you won't return at some later date.

Chances are that if you do you won't notice the subtle differences between its position now and its position then. Those changes involve millimeters over a series of years — each micro-movement carefully planned, and laboriously plotted by the one part of this enhanced creature that still belongs to a lonely and tormented human being. You wouldn't see anything if you came back a year from now. Or even a century from now. But give it time. Sooner or later, with all its movements plotted and

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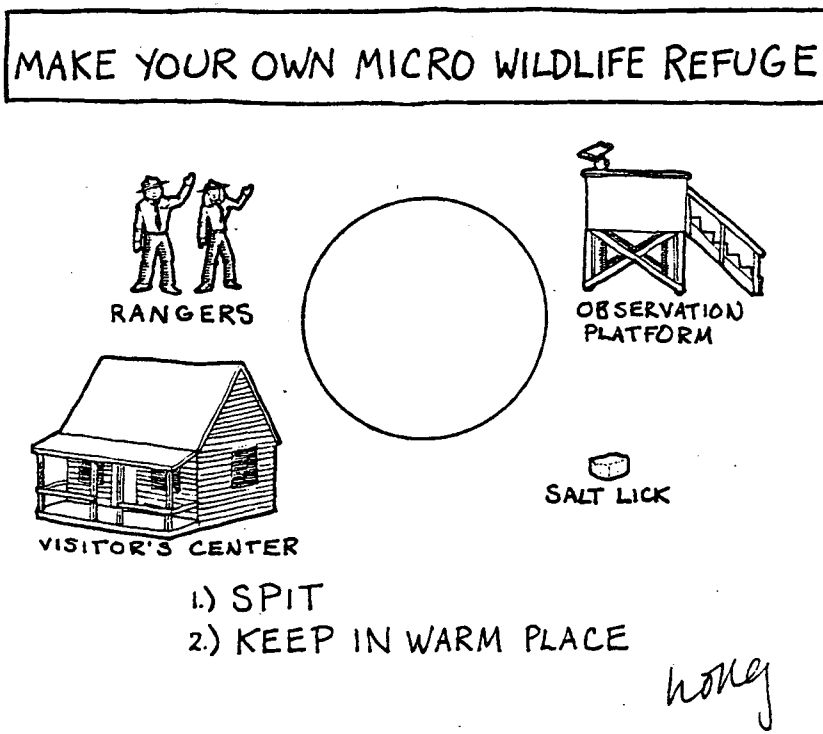
memorized, all its calculations finished and all its plans made, the thing will come to life and perform its dance at the proper speed. Sooner or later, it will tell the Vlhani what they need to know.

That, Ch'tpok tells me, is when everything will change.

Until then, it's just a statue.

You might consider it a monument.

But you won't guess which kind.



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A book publisher used to claim that the greatest advantage genre fiction has is its willingness to trade ideas back and forth, that writers will write entire novels in response to someone else's book. This point never quite convinced me (wasn't Lord of the Flies, *for instance, written in response to* Penguin Island?*), but there's no denying that the science fiction field encourages the free trade of ideas.*

Case in point: Ray Bradbury's story "Quid Pro Quo" from our Oct/Nov. 2000 issue memorably told of a time-traveler who set out to make sure someone used his natural talents instead of squandering them. In this story, Eyal Teler responds directly to Mr. B. Mr. Teler is an Israeli computer programmer whose previous publications include articles like "Streaming of Complex 3D Scenes for Remote Walkthroughs" (actually, that's his M.Sc. thesis). He has a fondness for puns that he managed to curb in this story, his first published work of fiction.

Possibilities

By Eyal Teler

THE MEMORY WILL HAUNT me until my death — not long now. Fifty years could not erase the image of that old man, the feeling of my fists meeting his face. I can still see him standing there, taking my blows without protest, then crumpling to the ground. No cry, no blood, just a helpless body. Funny how this is what I remember — killing myself. The rest is too fantastic to contemplate: the time machine, Ray introducing me to myself, asking me not to become that man, not to go to Korea, to war.

The death — the death is real. Ray might have taken the body back with him, but the memory remains — killing a helpless old man, without reason, in a bout of madness. It is a cancer — much like the one the doctors diagnosed, it eats me from inside. For many years I had used my writing and my success to block it, but the memory has won — no stories come to me as I'm lying on this hospital bed.

Thoughts that had played in my mind long ago, before I decided there was nothing but madness in them, are now coming back — questions

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about the reality of it all. How could Ray get a time machine, in that other reality? Just having me go to war couldn't change reality so much, could it? It would be hubris to think so. And my actions, my words, that killing — they didn't make sense.

Yet it couldn't have been a hallucination. The only drug in my life had been my cigarettes, and my mind had always been sound enough — even when I suffered from depression. Besides, that time machine left a mark on the asphalt — I checked for it the next day.

I wish I had had the courage to find out what really happened on that day. I've never told anyone about it. Only once, about twenty years ago, did I try, half-heartedly, to find an answer.

"You must be Simon," she said. It sounded so conclusive that for a moment I was tempted to turn back from her door. After all, if I could only be Simon, a specific, well-defined Simon, what use was there in seeing her?

"And you have no choice but to be Sedef, I guess." I wondered, though. I hadn't expected a short, round-faced girl, nor that broad smile in response to my dry joke. But her soft voice, with a hint of foreign accent, was as I remembered it from the phone.

"Come in," she said, and I followed the path that her hand traced in the air, to a brightly lit room with landscapes and a kitten picture on the walls. She motioned me to sit on the beige sofa, but I just stood, feeling as if I happened to walk onto the set of the wrong movie.

"What did you expect — candlelight and voodoo accessories?"

Was I that transparent? What had I expected? An older woman, perhaps, with an air of mystery — a fraud — not someone my wife's age, about half my fifty years. It was just a silly cliché, of course, and I wouldn't have dared using it in a story. Funny how easy it was to use it in real life.

She looked more like a grade-school teacher than a seer, with her open, gentle, not-too-sharp face. Maybe it was fitting, in a way. We were all just gullible kids, those of us who came to her. Sure, Ray said that people swore by her. But then, he also said that we should remain kids at heart. He may be my friend and mentor, but that doesn't mean we have to agree on everything.

How had I managed to convince myself to visit a woman with a power

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I didn't believe in? It was probably not too late to fix that mistake. I decided to turn around and leave.

The sofa was comfortable.

"So, Sedef, what can you tell me about that power of yours?"

She smiled. "Is this an interview?"

"No." I preferred not to think of it that way. Interviews were intrusive and tiring, and my seeds of dislike for them had long ago grown into resentment. "Just curious. I never met anyone who claimed they had a power to see alternate realities."

She giggled. "Will you stop calling it a power? Any more of this and I'll have to start wearing spandex outfits. I don't think I have the body for them." She didn't. Not that the flowery dress she wore looked that great on her.

"My talent, or 'gift,' if you wish, is the ability to see what might have happened had you made a different decision at some specific point in your life. I can tell you the most likely path that your life would have taken in that case. I don't really know how I do it, and, no, I can't really prove it, but people always tell me that it feels right, that they really would have done things that way." Of course they would, if she was a good enough con.

"So, tell me what would have happened had I gone to war. I mean, to Korea."

"Sorry," she said, "I need to get more of a feeling for you first. Like, what do you do for a living?"

I didn't know whether to feel insulted that she didn't know me, or be happy that I didn't have to deal with yet another mushy encounter.

"I create dreams." My futuristic dystopias could perhaps be more correctly classified as nightmares, but it was the more lighthearted contemporary fantasy, the kid stuff, that had made me a household name. The wonders of commercialism. Not that I complained—it had been nice to take these vacations in fantasy lands.

She gave me a vacant stare.

I showed her. I liked telling tales. I loved the moment of conception, the minute or two when the idea was born, still ugly and unclean, but with its inner beauty already showing. I told her a story set in a world where everyone had her power, and knew the results of their choices.

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"Wow!" The look she gave me could only be described as awe. My stomach turned.

"You liked my story?"

"What? Oh, it was fine. It's not that. It's just that your power of suggestion is so strong! You must be a great author!"

What a good performance — I nearly fell for it. Obviously she had known all along who I was. Still, I decided to play her little game.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, everyone affects the possibilities, you know. Not just choices affect them, but also wishes and dreams and desires. Authors, they don't just think of ideas — they develop them, research them, let other people share them. Their words are like magic — they can change the world. Even the impossible can become possible this way. I once went with a friend to a writers' conference. I could feel the possibilities change all around me. Not a lot, but it was still a little frightening.

"But you, you just told a story, without thinking about it a lot, without sharing it with lots of people, and I could feel the world changing. I could feel my power — damn!" She laughed. "Now I'm calling it a 'power' myself. I could feel it grow a little stronger, like this world was becoming more like the one you told me about. It's like you're changing the possibilities directly. I don't know any famous writers, but I don't think it's normal."

"I'll try not to write too many alien invasion stories, then." Yeah, right. Trying to convince me she had a power was one thing. Telling me *I* had a power was just too much. "So, can you do your reading now?" Better get this charade over with.

"Yeah, I think I have enough feeling for you now. What war was that?"

"Korea."

"Wow, that's old! Sorry, didn't mean it like that. It's just that most people come to me to validate some recent decision they've made, not to ask me about something that happened thirty years ago. Don't know how easy it'd be. Hell, I was just a little baby in Turkey at the time." She was older than I had thought. "But I'll try."

Her eyes lost focus and looked up, and her forehead creased, as if she were trying hard to remember something. Then her hand went to her chin, her fingers brushing her lips. She reminded me of a female version of

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Rodin's "Thinker" — but with clothes on, which made it somewhat less interesting.

I waited. I thought how to spin the tale I had told her into a publishable story. A better point-of-view character and some plot complications suggested themselves — enough material to pursue back home.

Sedef was still in thought, so I got up, curious to see what titles she had on her bookshelves. She didn't have anything of mine. Several shelves strained under the weight of reference books — many of them about medicine. The rest were mostly classics and assorted poetry. She seemed to like Frost.

I glanced at my watch, then looked at her, and wished she would stop. She could have at least made the show less boring — she could have mumbled or something.

"You know — " Her words startled me. I half imagined that she had fallen asleep in that posture. "There's something very strange here. Some — barrier. I've never felt anything like it. I may be able to see through it, but it will take me some time. Could you tell me perhaps why you didn't go to war? That might help."

What could I tell her, that I had murdered myself for no reason, as if I had been possessed? That since that day I kept fearing that I'd kill the people I loved? It had been too much for a boy of nineteen to think about. I was declared unfit for duty, of course, due to my mental state. I shut myself in my room and stopped seeing my friends. I wrapped myself in my writing and hoped that the stories would help me forget. All I wanted was to forget. Why did I come here to stir up these memories?

I made a show of glancing at my watch. "Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot an appointment. I have to go. It's probably for the best. You'll be able to look into my other possibility at your leisure, without pressure. Don't worry, I'll pay you for your time. Here." I pushed a hundred into her hand as I picked up my coat and made my way to the door. "I'll come back another day."

I went out quickly, but I think that I heard her say: "But I don't take money...."

Lying in this hospital room, where day and night fade into a half-waking sameness, the memory makes me long for those days gone by, for

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the sound of words forming on a page in my typewriter, for conferences, even for signings — yes, I half miss even the company of people, of fans, and of Carolyn, into whose arms and tall, athletic body I returned that day; Carolyn of the intoxicating smell. I had overlooked her indiscretions, as she had for a while overlooked my mistress and true love — my writing. After our divorce, the gossip columns told me that she had decided famous actors were easier to deal with than famous authors.

Those had been busy days — too busy to go back to see Sedef, or so I'd told myself; busy enough to push the memory back into its lair, and take the thought of her with it. Once, some ten years ago it was, I think, I saw her on TV, on *60 Minutes*. She was a physician. "Miracle doctor" they called her — one whose diagnosis was always on the mark. She had been offered work at ROI, a big research firm. I was tempted to find her again, to have her finish the reading. It didn't matter if she was a fraud. If she could have come up with some plausible explanation, something to help me close that painful subplot of my life, that would have been enough.

I laugh inwardly, and cough outwardly. It hurts — my punishment for being such a skeptic. I've seen strange things in my years on Earth, not the least of them killing an older version of myself, and still I don't give her the benefit of the doubt — even though she had told me of a special barrier. She couldn't have known enough for that to be a trick.

I found out where her lab was, but I didn't go. She'd be too busy to do a reading for a silly author, I was sure — excuses were always my strong suit. Perhaps she didn't even do readings anymore, being a famous and busy doctor. My wish to meet her remained just that — a wish. I still wish for it now, but it is too late. Even picking up the phone is too hard for me now.

There's a knock on the door — a futile gesture. Weak as I am, the mere thought of saying "come in" makes me feel tired. I hear my thought echoed by the gruff voice of an orderly. There's some argument about nobody being allowed to see me, but it's settled quickly.

The door opens gently and the tapping of low heels approaches my bed. I wait until she gets within my view — no use wasting my strength on turning my head. I wonder who she is and what she wants. I don't get many visitors — Ray is the only one, in fact. I made sure the press was kept out.

"Hello, Simon," she says. The voice startles me so that for a moment

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I forget my weakness and turn my head, and I see her sad smile. "I'm Sedef. You once came to me for a reading."

As if I could forget. Yet the shock adds to my weakness and I can't even tell her that. I can't even smile back at her. I think of that old man that I hit — how silently he fell.

She has aged a lot since last I'd seen her. At last her looks seem to have caught up with her age. She looks rounder, and her hair, black touched with gray, is more orderly now. Perhaps she has a daughter named Pearl who is combing it for her, I muse — creating background details is a hard habit to break. Her clothes are more elegant, and I think the suit suits her — I find the pun amusing.

The joke eases the shock and at last I manage to straighten my fingers — a feeble gesture of hello. She notices it and smiles. I'm glad now that the blanket is not over my hand, even though my arm feels cold.

She sits by my bed, on the chair that up till now has been reserved for Ray, on his infrequent visits. She takes my cold hand in her warm one. It's a good feeling, to have someone warm touch me. Her smile is warm, too, and there is warmth in her eyes. I find that I'm a little uncomfortable with all that warmth, even though I've often wished for more warmth, both for my body and for my heart. I don't complain, though — I let her keep holding my hand.

"You know," she says, "I was really insulted when you left me, twenty years ago, and even more when you didn't come back. I decided to put you out of my mind, but I couldn't. I met no one like you, with your power to alter the possibilities, and that strange barrier in your past. When I found out who you were, I was even more intrigued. You couldn't have thought that the other path would have made you more successful. So why were you interested in it?

"I tried quite a few tricks to see your other path. I even researched you, and read some of your books, to get a better feeling for you. You know, some of them are quite disturbing. I liked the Lilian series, though. It's more humorous and optimistic. It helped me forget the insult and think that perhaps there was some good in you after all.

"Anyway, I finally discovered that to move through the barrier I first had to move a little farther back in time. I didn't even know I could do that, before. It then became easier than any other reading. It was as if your other

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path was the natural one, and I had to get back on it, and then continue. It still doesn't make any sense to me. Still — " she pauses and smiles, "I guess I must thank you for all that practice. It really helped me understand better what I could do. It helped me help people better. Thank you." It feels bad to get thanked for being selfish, but her gentle "thank you" warms my heart nonetheless.

"You had a very interesting life, in that other possibility. Once I saw all I could see, I continued to follow you, day by day, in that other life. I can't see the future, you see, even in another possibility, so I spent a little time each day finding out what you were doing. Then you died there, and I thought that if you were still alive here.... I guess I better start from the beginning.

"Let me tell you the story of a young man," she says. "He left his home, his parents, his sister, and went to war. It wasn't easy for him to leave, and worse still was the war itself. Many of his friends died, people he cared a lot for. When it ended, he couldn't face going home. He felt that it wasn't right for him to live, with his friends dead. He started taking foolish risks, learning sports like cliff diving and bull fighting. Perhaps he was even disappointed that he was good enough at them to escape dying for years and years.

"It was in his days in Spain that he met a young woman from Turkey. He didn't want to be her friend, but she always came to see him fight. She saw something special in him. Once, after he was injured pretty badly by the bull, she happened to see him being brought to the hospital where she interned. It wasn't easy for her to get to see him, as he was quite famous, but she managed to pull a few strings and visit him." She smiles. "I guess it's the kind of thing she does.

"He talked to her then. He told her that he was sorry the bull didn't kill him. He said that he had friends waiting for him in another world, where life was beautiful, and there were no wars.

"Then he talked to her about wars. He talked about them for hours and hours. He would only go to sleep when the doctors made the woman leave his side, and would continue talking when she returned. 'Soldiers are dreamers,' he said, 'and when a soldier dies, there is a little less dreamt beauty in the world.'"

I understand now what she had told me about how people react to her readings. That really felt like me, when I was younger and naive.

"He talked about the dreams of his friends, and how these dreams

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came to an end. And he talked about the dead of the enemy. He described the horrors of the ones unfortunate enough to survive, without parts of their body, or without a place to live, or things to eat. When he came to the end of what he had seen with his own eyes, he talked of the wars he had heard about, the horrors he could only imagine.

"Eventually he finished talking, and slept for an entire day. When he woke up, he said that perhaps it was good that he didn't die. He had a gift for stories, before he went to war, he said. Perhaps if he could put all these horrors on paper, to show people what war was like, then he could do some good, and make his friends in heaven happy.

"But the woman had a special gift. She had heard his war stories, and she had sensed something, and so she told him 'No.' 'You are special,' she said. 'Whatever you tell becomes more real, more possible. Don't tell stories of war; tell stories of peace.'

"And he did. He told her stories of ending conflicts, of age-old feuds becoming forgotten, through acts of love and kindness; of tyrants falling, and of religious tolerance. He told of Koreas healing back into one country, of Turkey and Greece ending their differences, of peace in the Middle East, of Europe joined. She was his only audience. 'People don't want stories of peace,' he used to say. 'They want conflict, action.'

"They moved in together, into a small apartment on the outskirts of Madrid. She worked at the hospital while he took care of their children and thought of new stories to tell. She would come home exhausted, and he would read stories to her while she slept. Around them, the world blossomed. It took years and years, but they could track the change. Those stories that he typed, they kept together with the news clippings from the papers, when they became true. They could not be any happier, with each other, with their children, and with the world.

"And then he fell ill. The doctors found lung cancer, too advanced to be cured. They tried, the doctors. He tried. He told stories of doctors finding cures for cancer, and I know that they did, but they were too late to help him. He died in hospital, a few days ago. He did so much good for the world, but he couldn't do himself a favor and quit smoking, the silly man." Her voice breaks at the end. She squeezes my hand and falls silent.

It couldn't have been. She must have gotten it wrong. "I — " I gasp — "killed — me."

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"Huh, what?" Her thoughts return to me from elsewhere.

"Ah — " I start to say, but my voice betrays me. I force my head to my right, to the stand where my laptop sits. I'm not sure if I truly thought I'd write any stories here, or whether I just enjoyed the disapproving looks of Ray, who likes to act as if computers are demons taken form.

When it boots, and the word processor opens, she helps guide my feeble hand over the keys. "i killed me," I write. "time machine." Could I have helped create one with my stories, in that other reality? Did I really have that much power to change the world?

She thinks for a while, probably trying to decide if my illness had made me delirious.

"Well," she finally says, "It sounds rather fantastic, but a time machine could explain why the other path felt more natural. It would take something that could really warp reality to change the natural path of someone's life. But I still don't understand what you mean by 'I killed me.' You mean literally?"

I don't answer her. I'm too weary to make a sound or even nod.

"Simon, I'm sorry. I've tired you with my story. I guess I'll come back later, after you've rested a little."

She gets ready to let go of my hand, and I force my fingers to tighten around her. I know that there's no way I can hold on, so I'm grateful that she stops and sits back down.

"Simon," she says, and I can hear the humor in her voice, can almost see her smile. "It's about time you didn't let go so easily." She pauses, probably smiling again. I open my eyes, and sure enough, there she is, smiling and looking into my eyes. Her smile grows wider. "Good," she says.

"I know you're tired, but I'll tell you what we'll do. I'll ask you questions and you can squeeze my hand for the answers. One time for yes, two for no. No, bad idea — wouldn't want to tire you. Nothing for no, then. I'll just wait enough to make sure." She smiles again.

"Okay, let's see if I get this straight: the older you, from the other reality, came back in a time machine to the time you were about to go to war, and you ended up killing him. Is that what happened?"

I hesitate for a second, then squeeze her hand feebly.

"That's what I thought. Not that it makes any sense. I'm quite sure

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now that the possibility I followed was your natural path, and you never got near a time machine there. There probably never was one to be near. So it must have been something else. But what? I wish you could tell me more. Maybe after you've rested."

No way. I'm not letting her go. I have to finish this now. There might not be another day. What was the signal for "no"? Nothing — no, that's no good. I guess I'll just have to squeeze "yes."

"Yes? So you want to rest?"

I guess that saying "no" now would be okay.

"No? Or are you just resting? Not a very smart signal scheme I came up with, is it?" She smiles. I smile back, which probably looks grotesque, with half my face paralyzed.

She smiles a big smile back. "Well, if you can smile a big smile like that, I guess you don't need to rest. So, you want to continue?"

I squeeze "yes."

"You want the computer?"

No. I just need to think.

"You need some time to think?"

Hey, she didn't tell me she has ESP too. I smile in my thoughts, and squeeze her hand.

I think back to that day, fifty years ago. My memory is as sharp as ever, but emotions still cloud my view. I push past them, try to see the scene as I saw it then — two men stepping out of a strange contraption that hadn't been there a moment before. One of them, old, feeble, and unfamiliar, the other, Ray, old but recognizable. I remember him telling me the other guy was the old me, and I then saw myself in him. I nearly freaked out then.

There's some detail here, some buried realization that I must uncover. I stop thinking and let the scene take over, as if it were part of a story, as if these were characters of my own creation that I'm trying to get to understand.

Obviously, Ray was the protagonist. He was the one who talked to me, the one who acted. The old me did little. What did Ray want? He asked me not to become that guy. He wanted me to continue writing. He brought that guy to show me what I'd become, and then took his body away. Yet Sedef says that I died in hospital. Perhaps he snatched me from there, then

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returned me back, dead. Did she miss that moment? She probably couldn't follow every moment of my life — that would have left her no time for her own.

No, that doesn't make sense. That old me looked old and muddled, but he didn't look like he was dying. How did he look? I try to picture that guy — his face, like mine, but wrinkled, gaunt; his body thin, shriveled. That's nothing like me, even after the cancer started taking its toll. I might have imagined this to be me, fifty, even twenty years ago, but not now. Could I have aged differently in that other reality? I find it unlikely.

Ray, the bastard! Did he hire an actor to impersonate me?

"Ray!" I cry. It comes out as a croak. I look to my laptop. When she gets it for me, I type, "Can you check him?"

I wait. "Ray — Bradbury; the writer, right? I remember now. You knew him before you went to war. You don't meet him again in the other possibility, but I remember that my research of you mentioned him. I guess you're friends here. Now that I think of it, I saw him interviewed once. He thanked you for putting science fiction in the limelight. That stuck in my mind."

It was really Ray who deserved the fame. He was the real artist, with his prose that was poetry. I've always thought it unfair that it was my straightforward style that won people's hearts. Ray never agreed with me, of course. "Simple people need a simple style," he used to say. It was enough for him that they were reading.

"So Ray had something to do with the time machine? And you want me to check his alternate life?"

I squeeze "yes" to both questions.

"I'm not sure I could follow someone else's life based on your decision. I do have some feeling for him, from that interview and what I saw in your own life.... I guess I'll just have to try."

I find it funny that she uses the same Rodin posture that she did twenty years ago. She does have nice lips, I notice when her fingers brush them. I wonder if she has anything of mine on her bookshelves now.

I imagine her mind flying from the east coast to the west, finally settling on Ray's house, dropping down to the mess he calls a basement, to see him sitting amongst his books, writing his next story on his old typewriter.

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A touch on my arm wakes me up. "Simon, are you asleep?" I open my eyes and I see her smile. "Not a very clever question, is it?

"I'm sorry," she says, "but I couldn't really see Ray. I did find something. It jumped into my mind, when I tried to look for Ray, in that other possibility. I guess I could see it because it had something to do with you. He wrote a story about you, you see. He even got it published very recently, so I guess we're lucky that I'm just checking for it now. Wouldn't have been able to see it before."

"What — was — it — about?"

"I didn't see the exact details — just a second, I'll see what I can get. My God! It was about him taking your old you to the past to convince you not to go to war. Would you believe it? Did he really do that? No, of course not. Oh, I see. It makes perfect sense now!

"Ray is a good writer, right?" I know an understatement when I hear one. "He probably waited for you to come back, all these years. He thought about you, he even got a story published about you. He finally did it — he changed the possibilities; he changed your past! That's some power."

The time machine, the encounter — they were part of a story? He probably didn't even realize what he's done. I certainly hope this doesn't mean that book burning will become true one day. But I don't really care. It all makes sense now — my irrational behavior, the killing — it was just a story. I didn't kill me! I didn't kill anybody! It's like the stone has been raised from over my grave, and I can breathe again. I smile, and Sedef smiles back at me, her brilliant smile amplifying mine.

Ray didn't have to make me kill myself! But I guess that's just the way he is. I smile again, imagining how I'll give him a piece of my mind in the next life. There must be one — enough people believe in it. I might have to wait for him a few years, though — he doesn't seem too willing to let go of this life. I, on the other hand, will soon be looking at new vistas. I hope that heaven isn't based on the most mundane of human dreams.

I look at Sedef one last time. She takes my hand and I close my eyes, lose all sensation but her warmth. No more pain, no more queasiness. It seems so right to have her by my side as my consciousness slips slowly away. The warmth becomes sunny, and I'm surrounded by light. A tunnel beckons me. Of the world of my life, I carry only one thing with me; one thing, as if sketched by Lewis Carroll — a smile. ☙

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

THUGGISH BEHAVIOR, IN THE RELENTLESS PURSUIT OF A SEQUEL

IT IS questionable whether any movie deserves to make over $800 million. But in the case of 2002's *Spider-Man*, at least that level of success was understandable. A well-known and endearing comic hero swung into action, in a film with plenty of soaring flash, and even a little bit of heart. Directed by a man, Sam Raimi, who exults in the cheesy exuberance of American schlock film (see *Army of Darkness*, 1993), but who is also capable of gravitas and grace (see 1998's *A Simple Plan*), *Spider-Man* was a bright-colored, high-energy popcorn flick that, while not exactly deep, was less shallow than expected.

The casting of Tobey Maguire, a young man with more acting talent than hunky marquee value, was a key factor. Maguire brought great sweetness and vulnerability to the nerdy, lovelorn loser who comes of age as a superhero. His Peter Parker was a young man anyone could root for. Capable of missteps and bad judgment, Spider-Man's alter ego was nonetheless a good soul trying to do good in the world. He brought this same quality to his superhuman adventures.

Daredevil, another Marvel comic franchise, went into movie production about the same time *Spider-Man* was cleaning up at the box office. *Spidey*'s success is said to have bolstered *DD*'s FX and martial arts budget, but clearly did nothing to increase the likability of the new film's hero or the clarity of his storyline.

Daredevil's number one failing is that relative newcomer, writer/director Mark Steven Johnson, is no Sam Raimi. Unable to develop the tragic nature of his very human hero coherently, Mr.

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Johnson merely lowered the lighting and pumped up the rock soundtrack and the violence of his ludicrous plot. Problem number two is casting. Unlike Sam Raimi, Mark Steven Johnson *did* opt for hunky marquee value when hiring an actor for his film's titular role. In fact, he cast *People*'s current "Sexiest Man Alive" and J-Lo boy-toy, Ben Affleck, as the dual protagonist.

I like Ben Affleck. (No, really I do.) A local lad who made good, Mr. Affleck is intelligent, personable, and very willing to poke fun at his brouhaha of a matinee idol life. Unfortunately, he is not an actor of immense range. Although very good at playing cocky yuppie types, his forte is not exactly brooding intensity with tragic undercurrents. Yet this is exactly the kind of quality that could make viewers care for a blind attorney named Matt Murdock who is consumed by his vigilante nighttime gig as Daredevil, Man Without Fear.

Since his Marvel debut in the Spring of 1964, the Daredevil character has undergone many transformations as he has been handed from one writer-artist team to the next. His costume and hairstyle has changed, and pieces of his backstory have been altered over the years as well. He has had the occasional breezy, almost light-hearted adventure. But, for the most part, Matt Murdock/Daredevil has been a solitary and melancholy figure, unlucky in love, and — like most comic book heroes — too prone to solve his problems with the *Splatt! Thok! Krakoww!* of physical violence.

Still, in my memory of the comic book hero, I had no doubt that he was a good guy. The film version changes this. In his own verbal defense, the best the movie Daredevil can say of himself is, "I am not the bad guy here." I can't say that I agree. In the pursuit of what they have called "gritty" and "realistic" storytelling (oh, *puleeze!*), the filmmakers behind *Daredevil* have made it difficult to tell the difference between the heroes and the villains.

Yes, I know all about the moral ambiguity of modern life, all of us living in that gray zone between the white and black of good and evil. But too many recent cultural "heroes" have made an uncomfortable shift straight out of the gray and into something much darker.

These days, in this country especially, there seems to be some sort of need to celebrate the thug as a hero. Perhaps, like President Bush, we all wish to annihilate our perceived enemies, without pausing

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for the rule of law (or even a resolution from the UN). But you can't put the popularity of shows like the Latino drug-lord drama, *Kingpin*, down to September 11th. Tony Soprano was snuffing out goombahs right and left long before the Twin Towers were hit.

I'm not sure where this pop cult ethical realignment is coming from. I only know that it doesn't suit a comic book superhero.

Conflicted is fine. Peter Parker is conflicted. This film's Daredevil is something else again. Mr. Johnson seems to have gone out of his way to expunge the most heroic aspects of Matt Murdock's character, starting with the reason for his blindness. In the comic, a young boy bravely, impulsively tries to keep a sightless man from being run down by a truck. He is blinded by the radioactive waste that spills from the back of the vehicle. In the movie, it is still radioactive waste that takes his sight and heightens his other senses to superhuman levels. But here, young Matt is simply running away from his father — a careless, passive victim.

In the present-day story, Murdock's altruism appears to have been altogether abandoned in favor of a heightened taste for brutality. Early in the movie, a rapist named (inside joke) Quesada is acquitted in court. Daredevil isn't content to mete out his own justice by beating up the creep in an alleyway. He feels the need to hunt the guy down in a crowded barroom where he takes the time to pulverize every single human in the club, set the place on fire, and then hunt down the "bad guy" in the nearby subway where he takes great sardonic relish in knocking him down on the tracks and executing him with a C train.

Perhaps it would be easier to accept such behavior from Daredevil if he seemed more torn up about it. But while Matt Murdock does visit his local Hell's Kitchen priest from time to time, he doesn't really seem troubled by his own behavior at all. I can't say whether this is another indicator of the general deficiency of Mr. Affleck's acting. I can only observe that I have never seen a superhero so lacking in energy and charisma.

The film's arch-villains are actually much more likable, in their own sick way, than its morose lead. Michael Clarke Duncan makes quite a dapper Kingpin (even if his character seems to be an amalgam of The Fixer, The Kingpin, The Rose, and a few other Marvel baddies). The twinkle never leaves

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his eyes during his few scenes. Better yet is Colin Farrell as Bullseye. Although much different from the blue and white spandex be-tighted villain I remember from the comic art, the black leather outfit Farrell sports lends him a bit more street cred for modern New York. And even if it didn't, it wouldn't have mattered. Farrell is the one actor who seems to be having a high old time making this movie. He is as buoyant and charming as Affleck is lethargic and dreary.

And then there is Elektra, Matt Murdock's first and truest love, who was originally portrayed as a rich Columbia co-ed who becomes a ninja assassin-for-hire. (Hey, I'm sure it happens every day!) The Elektra of the comic is the ultimate bad girl and Daredevil nemesis. But one of the oddest aspects of the big-screen adaptation of *Daredevil* is the coy way in which Mr. Johnson tries to portray Elektra Natchios as a sweet young thing who just happens to enjoy slinging sais (swords) and donning a dominatrix outfit.

And he almost pulls off this self-contradictory ingénue role because of a fortuitous bit of casting. Jennifer Garner, of *Alias* fame, really knows how to kick up her heels and kick butt. She also imbues all her roles with a girl-next-door amiability that is very attractive. Unfortunately, since she exists in this movie merely as love interest and avengeable victim, her couple of athletic scenes of martial arts gymnastics seem more like a sideshow than an explication of her character or a true element of the story.

Then again, nothing about this story makes a heck of a lot of sense here. As is the danger with most adaptations of comic book canons, when you compress almost forty years of storytelling into a single movie, you need a writer of considerable talent to winnow a massive amount of material into an entertaining and intelligible film. Mark Steven Johnson does not apparently possess that level of writing skill.

All is not lost, however. The writer/director of *Daredevil* possesses a highly developed business sense.

As Bill Clinton might have said if he worked for a major studio: "It's about the franchise, stupid!" *Daredevil*, the movie, doesn't hold together as a narrative specifically because Mr. Johnson, executives at Fox and Marvel, and whatever other suits conferred on the matter wanted the option of bringing everyone back for a sequel.

Two of the leads dead at the end of the movie? Say it ain't so!

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A villain charms the audience? Well then, let him crash through a stained glass church window and fall five stories into the windshield of a car, but bring him back alive for the rolling of the credits. Another key character murdered? Hold on, there's talk of a spin-off movie, better hint that they are alive and well and designing jewelry somewhere. Great idea: Let's have the hero hunt down the man responsible for killing the two people he most loves on this Earth. Very dramatic! On the other hand, we can't have him kill the guy!

No way.

It's one thing to have Daredevil kill an anonymous rapist, but the dude who killed his loved ones is a primo character. That guy might be needed for the second installment. Or a third. Better just have DD rough him up a bit.

We knew it was coming to this. All and everything in service of the sequel, even if it's to the detriment of the movie you're making at the moment. Still, to see such a blatant and cold-blooded undermining of a feature movie in the relentless pursuit of a sequel — it depresses me.

This is the kind of corporate arrogance and greed that all the accountant watchdogs in the world couldn't make right. Maybe it calls for a new brand of superhero. Or at least a more discriminating moviegoer.

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Carol Emshwiller recently won the Philip K. Dick Award for her novel The Mount, *beating out fierce competition from her most recent collection of stories,* Report to the Men's Club. *Her new story is a tale of the uncanny with a sharp edge to it.*

Repository

By Carol Emshwiller

LOTS OF REASONS TO BE glad and stay that way. Food now. Things to do. A place to sleep. A path. A place at the top of a hill to sit and look.

This is after.

Something has happened, but we don't remember what. Should we try to find out or leave well enough alone? This may be the enemy's hilltop we sit on admiring the enemy's view. Or perhaps this hilltop used to be ours. Who is the enemy? And more important, who are we? Willing captives, that's for sure. Willing slaves with nothing much to do.

Many of us have wounds more or less healed. I myself have scars and something wrong with my leg. It's not so easy for me to climb to the view we love.

My only memory from before is a feeling of letting go. I remember thinking: I'm dying, but that's all right. I remember thinking of things I'd left undone but I didn't care. I thought, even right at the time: I never knew dying would be like this — serene, not sad, as if it didn't matter.

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I wonder that I remember some things so clearly while others seem gone or just beyond my reach no matter how hard I try to bring them back?

Waking up here, at first I thought it was where dead warriors go for their reward, but why would we come here with our limps, our lost eyes, lost arms and legs, our burns? There's not a man among us who isn't wounded in some way. Perhaps, instead, it's a rehabilitation center. Except nobody is being rehabilitated.

Could we find a better way to live than this even if we had planned it ourselves? Nature all around us, soft things to wear, heat at night, pools here and there, sun shades, an arbor?

Some of us are making the barracks more comfortable — putting up partitions as if this is what life will be from now on. As if this is our future so enjoy it. But can one be joyful without a past? Or can one live with nothing of any importance to prepare for?

I seem to be the only one wondering who we are and why we're here and should we stay without objecting? Nobody else does. This is their heaven. Now and then there's even things to shoot at. That makes them happy, though they only have slingshots they make themselves. They shoot lizards (try to), beetles, butterflies. They aim at hummingbirds. They shoot each other...shoulder and buttocks. So far, no one has been wounded seriously.

Most of us here are younger than I am. I think I might have done things like that myself at one time. If I did, it no longer interests me.

Having reached this stage (all of us grown up) we must have been looked after until we reached it. Somebody must have told us not to run holding knives, not to talk with our mouths full, not to take more than our share, not to climb too high in whatever tree there might be, and so forth. We can add and subtract. We can spell. And somebody must have said, "We don't eat that," "We don't do that," "We don't say that word," else why would I feel guilty every time I say those words myself and notice when the others say them? And somebody must have taught me the names of these flowers, lupine, larkspur, paintbrush, aster, wild iris...and to love them. Or does one love these as naturally as one loves the stars?

Into our space comes someone worse off than any of us. A bloody body — alive but barely, flopped here, on the edge of our garden.

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Till now nothing new has happened since we came, but we don't know how long we've been here. By the time we started marking off days we'd already been here quite some time.

The others want to throw it out...burn it...get rid of it.... They distrust it even though it's too badly hurt to be a threat. What if it's the enemy? "Look," we're saying, "it's not wearing yellow and its head isn't shaved."

Everybody wants to drop it off The Edge. We don't know who we are but at least we know we're not our enemies.

I tell the others I'll take it into my cubby and take care of it. Even if it is the enemy I may learn something. They can have it back later.

I carry It to my cubby. I let It have the cot while I sleep on the floor. I seem to know how to care for It, as if I'd once worked at caring for people. I'm wondering what I used to be. The others defer to me in many ways. I try to remember what I used to know.

Some of our skills come back. Or, rather, appear. Some wish there were musical instruments so we could check ourselves out on them. Some play on sticks or rub stones together. Someone made a box sort of thing and beats on that. Some with better legs than mine jump around to the tapping of the others.

When they do this they watch me to see if I'm watching. They like it when I smile. They need my nod. They won't have it much longer. It told me things. I keep what It says secret. There's no need for all of us to feel this yearning.

It sings me songs I already know but had forgotten. It says we used to have names and that we let our hair and beards grow.

It said, Go up, but It lost toes to frostbite. I had to cut them off myself.

It said there were doctors. It thinks I must be one.

I asked It to come with me. "Lead the way," I said. "I'll carry you."

"I'd not make it."

"We'll kill you. We don't like the different. We take you as a spy. We'd have thrown you over The Edge by now if I didn't guard you."

"I've been in pain a long time."

"Dead, I'll let the rest of us have you. We'll throw you over."

It said it wouldn't mind.

It tells me we once had wives. It says It had one of its own. It tells me

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we all had mothers. They were the ones who taught us those first things about not running with knives, and to keep ourselves and our language clean.

I have thought to go in search of mine, but how long do mothers last? And how old am I? I study my face in one of the ponds. I see gray at my temples.

Or should I go in search of my wife? Or a wife?

First It seems to rally. I think It will live. And then It doesn't. It sighs and then It moans. It breathes as if climbing our hill. Now and then It says, Maaaaa. That's Its last word.

I let us have It. We throw It over The Edge.

They keep busy fixing up their cubbies.... They're building another arbor. Lumber appears. Every now and then new shoes and hats appear.

They took down the hummingbird's nest. It had two eggs in it. It was made of cottonwood cotton and spider web strands. They tore it apart to make sure that was all it was made of, and that was all.

They netted the goldfish. They dared each other to swallow them and they did swallow them. They dared each other to swallow spring peepers and they swallowed those, too. It has escalated to beetles and stink bugs. Spiders.

This is definitely the place where old warriors go. As long as there's something to shoot at, things to dare, it's our heaven. And as long as there's something to make beer out of...or they'll ferment bread. I don't think I can say that I haven't done many of these things myself. I remember odd horrible tastes. When I drink their beer I remember being drunk before.

I'm ready. I have Its bloody coat. I have Its bloody mittens. I have a staff. It said I'd need one. I make a shirt into a backpack. I fill it with rations and tie it on. I tape up my bad knee.

We will try to stop me. If I really am a doctor we will need for me to stay. I wonder if we will follow me and try to bring me back. I'll leave in the middle of the night. We always sleep like soldiers after a long march.

Thank goodness all we have are slingshots, but a few of us have rediscovered the twirling kind. We can do damage. But we won't be expecting anything out of the ordinary. We'll not wake up to catch me leaving.

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It's always foggy around the hills at our back. It said to walk through with a scarf around my mouth. It said it would be three hundred steps before I'd leave the fog behind. "Keep going up.

"After the fog, trees will begin. There'll be cliffs. Keep on. For the first night and first day and next night, don't stop. Then hide yourself under rocks and rest. After that, go on at night. Hide in the daytime. At the top of the third ridge you'll come to a path. Follow it to the left. There's a cottage. A woman lives there. Her name is Lark. Mine is Ray. Tell her about me."

I wish I could remember my name so I could tell her who I am.

I SNEAK AWAY and hobble up through fog. As I enter it a horn goes off and keeps on sounding. Loud. It had not told me about this so I wonder about all the rest It said. I hear things scuffling near me. Every now and then I hear something roar. Once I think I see a shapeless shape rear up, darker against the fog. I see the gleam of teeth. I think, This must be what happened to It before it was thrown down to us. I keep on but I wonder if perhaps It wanted me to be found out, captured, and end up as It did, first torn and bloody and then thrown over The Edge. I seemed to be important to us so this may be a way of getting rid of me.

When I come out from the fog, the horn stops. And it's dawn. When I look back to our Heaven, all I see is cloud, but way beyond it there are rows of white topped peaks. You can't see The Edge at all. Ahead of me are closer hills that I must climb. My bad knee has started to give way at every third or fourth step but I don't fall.

I remember trees like these. Pine cones. I remember squawking jays. I remember long, coach whip snakes that climbed the trees. As I remember that, the thought of a garden comes to me. There's a back door and I'm sitting on the steps and there's the snake, and then, out of nowhere, I know my name.

I yearn to sit and watch dawn rising behind me over our fog, but I do as It said. I don't stop. I eat as I climb. With my bad knee, I know if I stopped I'd have to warm the stiffness up all over again.

When I finally reach the ridge with the path along the top I'm so tired

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I can't remember if I'm supposed to turn right or left. I can't remember how many days or nights I've hobbled. I drop where I am, in plain sight. My yellow suit and Its bloody jacket must be brilliant against the snow even though I brushed them with dirt the first morning.

Later I half wake and crawl to a more sheltered spot. When I wake indeed, I've forgotten my name again. I should have written it...scratched it on bark or a pebble. If it comes to me again, I will.

I'm to turn left. Now that I'm more rested, I do remember.

I'm really limping now — shuffling. It never told me how far it was to Lark's cottage. It talked of walking nights but it didn't say how many. It didn't tell me if it was taking my limp into consideration. It said, "Keep to the ridge, but when the path dips down, stay on the path."

I wait a bit to see if it's dawn or dusk. When I see it's dusk I start out.

My leg is worse than it ever was since I first came to the Repository. I don't know how much farther I can go. Thank goodness for my staff. If I stop and rest too long, my food will run out. Should I keep on going even if I can only crawl? At least there's moonlight.

Later...I've no idea how much later, I give up. My food is gone and has been for some time. In the beginning, I strode off thinking I was strong in spite of my limp. Perhaps I'm older than I thought. Or our life is too soft and easy back in that Heaven.

I think to flop myself down but I'm not paying attention anymore. As I give up, I fall off the ridge. I slide on my back along a steep slope, gravel coming down with me. How could It have thought I'd be able to keep my footing in the moonlight of only half a moon?

Part way down I slow. I try to stop myself but then I see a light. I deliberately let myself slide farther. If I couldn't slide I'd not make it. Then I'm down and landed in a creek. At least the cold jars me so I rouse enough to pull myself out of it. I find I'm in the middle of a road. Small. Dusty. Just one lane. I lie there. The light is not far, maybe a hundred yards, but I can't make it. I can't make any distance at all. I curl up, cold and wet. I don't dare call out. Besides, who would hear me with the sound of the creek? I sleep or pass out.

* * *

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In the morning they come. Several men in granite-colored suits on their way to someplace else. Two carry me back to the cottage where the light was the night before. They plop me in a chair in front of a desk. I fall out of it but they prop me up again. Someone says, "Welcome to headquarters company."

A woman.

I remember women. This one is thin, but those are breasts. I remember breasts, large and small. I remember other things, things that make my penis twitch. She has tan hair cut short but I remember long hair, too, long enough so it got in my face...in my mouth. My name is on the tip of my tongue.

"Welcome, welcome. You've come from Ray."

"Ray is dead."

"News of Colonel Ray will be sent from command center to command center."

"You are Lark?" With a name like that I hadn't thought she'd be so thin and wrinkled and weathered. All this time, without realizing it till now, I'd kept her in mind as young with brown wavy hair, a wide countrified face, and serious brown eyes. I thought she lived alone. I thought she was the one who would rescue me.

"We've been waiting for you. Ray volunteered to bring one back if he could find one, or die in the attempt."

It occurs to me suddenly that, for all our friendliness, our whispering midnight talks, our songs, I never knew which side Ray was on—whether he was one of ours or one of theirs.

"Sorry, I can't introduce myself. My name is on the tip of my tongue. I dreamt that I remembered it but when I woke it was gone again."

"What comes back might be the name of your best friend or even your worst enemy. If you need a name I'll give you one later. For now you're doctor number 12. Go wash yourself, and eat and rest. This boy will help you."

She rings and here's a boy. He can't be more than ten or twelve. He's dressed in a granite-colored suit as the men were. He leads me through a wide door and into the mountain. The house is just the front for a complex of caves.

First I ask him his name, but he says names don't matter. He says they call him by his age. "Ten-and-a-half," he says.

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If I knew my age I could have a name, too. Forty-three? Forty-four? I look that old. I tell him to call me Forty-four. He ducks his head, but I see his secret smile.

Then I ask him who we're fighting and why?

He says, "It's us against them. That's how it always is."

"But who?"

"We call them Jack Asses. Mostly just Asses. Sometimes Mud Rats. Sometimes Ploops. They're stupid."

I'm wondering if they really are. I'm wondering if I used to be a Ploop, but I'm too tired to think about it or even care right now. And I'm too tired to eat or wash. I drink some milk and fall into a bunk still dressed as I am, still muddy. I don't even have the energy to pull off my wet boots, though I know I should.

Later, after I'm cleaned up and rested and dressed in one of those granite-colored suits, the boy takes me back to Lark. I ask her the same questions I asked the boy. She answers as though she doesn't know either though she pretends she does. I don't think she cares. She says it's no longer a problem of the right side or the wrong side. It's gone beyond that. Now it's a matter of kill or be killed. Loot or be looted. Conquer or be conquered. There's nothing else to do.

Lark recruits. Lark plans. Lark has the maps and charts. She has a radio but she mustn't use it. She says, "We're sending you in. You know mountains, you know cold, you know snowshoes, you know weapons, and you know your craft. You will stay just behind the lines and tend the wounded."

"If I help, I want to know what I'm dying for."

"You will serve," she says.

I tell her I will not.

Next I know I'm walking down that dirt road with others, all of us dressed as chunks of granite, some darker granite and some lighter. Ten-and-a-half is with me, helping to carry the medical supplies.

Perhaps she's right, nothing to do but be on the side you're on at any given time.

Besides, it's a job I like. It's worthwhile whichever side this is. The

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men look up to me. I'm older. When I tell them, "You'll be all right," they believe me and die encouraged — looking forward to home. These men are younger than those back with me in the Heaven. I'm wondering, will they go there if wounded? Their memories half gone? Knowing only that they belong together? That, at least they are not their own enemies — though was even that true?

We always cared so much about being us and not them but I am no longer us, though I must once have thought I was.

LATELY, I HAVE, on occasion, dreamt my name is Wesley. I remember...I *seem* to remember being called Wes. I wish I had more time to stop and think about it but there's hardly time even to eat and we sleep only a few hours whenever there's a moment's respite. Poor Ten-and-a-Half. But he works with a will. Sometimes he falls asleep on his feet — just drops where he is. I carry him to the nearest cot though lately there haven't been any extra cots. Lately I've put him in my own bed. I don't have much use for it.

There's one other doctor here and two male nurses. Our tents are set up between two rocky outcroppings so we're sheltered from the worst.

Yesterday a man came in wounded in the leg by mistake by his buddy. I hear they're daring each other into no man's land to taunt the enemy. Today I nurse a man who'd been burned by his friends in what was supposed to be a joke, but they misjudged the power of the charge.

I have to leave him and the other wounded. The battle escalates. I move forward to be with us even though us may not have much to do with me.

I tell Ten-and-a-Half to stay behind and help out here, but when I look back I see he follows. In a way I'm glad. I need him, but I worry. He's a good boy and deserves to have a little more of his life. Or one day he should be sent to medical school. He'll make a good and caring doctor. I must remember to speak to Lark about it.

I limp, I've lost a hand, an eye, but lots of reasons to be glad. Things to do. Food. A path. A pond. A hill to climb.

This is after.

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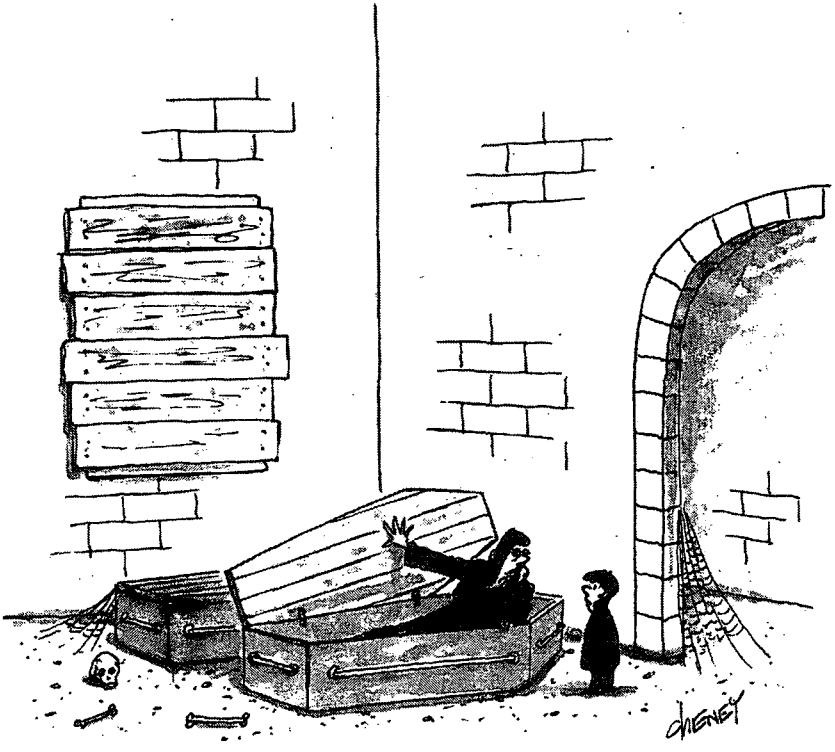
Something has happened.

I remember thinking: I'm dying, but that's all right. Something important has been left unsaid, but I didn't care. I was thinking, even right at the time: I never knew dying would be so serene.

Waking up here, at first I thought it was where dead warriors go for their reward but why would we come with all our mutilations? Perhaps it's a rehabilitation center.

There's a badly burned blind boy in the cubby next to mine. He and I wonder together how old he is. I make him a cane. I paint it white.



"I wet my coffin."

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When people mention the words "horror" and "Maine," of course people think first of Stephen King, the undisputed master. But here's a debut story that gives us a different look at the 23rd state and some of its unique and distinctive denizens, a few of whom have problems unlike those most of us face every day.

Al Michaud knows Maine well, but these days he lives in Nashville, Tennessee, where he is pursuing a Master's Degree in Information Science at Trevecca Nazarene University.

Clem Crowder's Catch

By Al Michaud

CLEM CROWDER WAS NOT the morbid sort, nor was he particularly ruthless. In fact most folks would say he was temperate in the conduct of his ways. Self-restrained of indulgences. Moderate in actions. That's why it's so funny he fell into the peculiar business that he did.

Not his fault, though, really. Blame can be placed squarely on Blinky Dinkins.

Two months previous Blinky Dinkins went jigging for bait pollock a short pull from Clapboard Island and never returned. No one but the Good Lord Harry knows the particulars of what happened that day, but the local conjecture didn't have to run too wild to piece it together. A surplus of spirits, a shortage of common sense, and shifty winds will addle a mind already three sheets to it. Into the drink went a jig, sweeps, cask of pollocks, three-quarters empty bottle of rotgut, and a cock-eyed Blinky. It could be said he was a victim of circumstance, but Blinky always stacked the deck against his favor.

Consequently, Clem Crowder was less startled than he otherwise

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might have been when he reached out his gaff for a pot-buoy and snagged Blinky Dinkins instead. A two-month bob in the open sea can have a negative effect on the most durable man's appearance, and Blinky was worse for wear, no doubt, but his identity was never in question. His glass eye still rolled loosely in its socket and he'd never quite lost that characteristic three-toothed grin.

Clem grabbed ahold of the corpse-entangled warp, took a bend around a cleat and commenced to wrestle Blinky into the boat. The body, covered with a variety of scavenging sea-life, spilled over the stern and into the bilge. The lobsters he plucked off and threw into the tank. Since Blinky wasn't anxious to be anywhere in particular, Clem pulled his traps for the rest of the day.

The sun was low in the sky when Clem hauled back to Clapboard Island. As with most veteran lobstermen, he went through his end-of-day routine with all the forethought of a spider building its web. Blinky Dinkins was the only break in this ingrained ritual. Him he half-hitched under the float.

Clem walked up the gangway and headed for the fishhouse he called home. It was perched along the narrow edge of the pier, atop four shoddy pylon supports. On windy days it swayed and creaked and threatened to topple dully into the sea.

An unexpected light filtered through the dingy window. This could only mean one thing: Mrs. Crowder was home early from work. He opened the door and found the missus quietly knitting in his favorite rocker.

"Evenin, Mr. Crowd-ah," said Mrs. Crowder, her eyes firmly set on her knitting needles.

"Evenin, Muth-ah," said Clem. He removed his boots and slicker and began a slow pace back and forth across the room, all the while sniffing the air with a considerable stentorian *whiff*. Mrs. Crowder never lifted her eyes.

"Wotchya sniffin fer, Mr. Crowd-ah?"

"*Snnff! Snnff!* Thut mebbe I cud 'dennify my supp-ah 'fore it's served to me, but I ain't smelt it yet. *Snnff! Snnff!*"

Mrs. Crowder peered up over her reading glasses. "That's cuz it's still waitin fer ye to cook it, Mr. Crowd-ah."

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Clem stopped his pacing, eyed his favorite rocking chair, still occupied by Mrs. Crowder, and sat down on a kitchen stool. "I gut t' be th' only werkin man on Clabberd whose wife cahn't be both-ahed t' cook a supp-ah."

Clem was an able fisherman. His wife rose to the bait. "I werk jus' as much as yew, Mr. Crowd-ah. An' prob'ly a lot hahd-ah!"

This was an ancient battle that Clem had not won in countless years of marriage. He resignedly withdrew to the kitchen. From the icebox he removed four scaly onions.

"Knobby Leonard's wife's a teach-ah, too, Muth-ah. An' she manages to put supp-ah on the table ev'ry evenin!"

"Ayuh? Perhaps I shud inquire Missus Leonard 'bout openin's in th' Ole Bell School. Might afford me more time fer supp-ah-cookin. How's that, Mr. Crowd-ah?"

Clem worked his knife through the onions. Tears welled in his eyes: not from the acrid snuff of diced onions, but for the prospect of Mrs. Crowder taking a position at Ole Bell School. Unlike the wife of Knobby Leonard, Mrs. Crowder was an ocean-going schoolmarm, aboard the well-traveled and often-departed ship of good Captain McGillicuddy. Though Clem disliked the fact that Mrs. Crowder never cooked supper when she came home from work, he was pleased that she only came home from work once every three years.

"Now, now, Muth-ah. Don't do anythin rash! Them McGill'cuddy childerns depend on ye fer their edgy-cashun," Clem said. "Who'd teach 'em prop-ah English?"

A job at the Ole Bell School might mean nightly suppers, but at the strict cost of daily run-ins with Mrs. Crowder. He had only endured his wife's presence for nine short intervals since she accepted her present schoolmarming position. Most husbands were not so lucky.

"Ran inta Blinky Dinkins this mahnin," Clem said, quickly changing the subject before his wife took the Ole Bell School notion seriously. The onions he scooped up and dumped into the boiling kettle, and from the icebox removed a grayish slab of haddock.

"Don't be mindless, Mr. Crowd-ah. Blinky's gone inta th' drink." It never ceased to amaze Clem that a woman who lived out of town for such long stretches of time still managed to know every detail of local gossip.

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"I knowed it. That's where I ran inta him." He wiped the grime of his fillet knife onto his pants leg.

The frantic motion of knitting needles stopped and Mrs. Crowder lifted her eyes toward him. "Didjya now?" she asked, eyeing him suspiciously. "An' how's Mr. Dinkins doin?"

"He wouldn't say, on account o' his condition."

"An' where's Mr. Dinkins now?"

"Restin und-ah th' float. He'll spend th' night, an' I'll call th' author'ties in th' mahnin."

"Mr. Crowd-ah, in this household we cordialize with our guests!" She drew a shawl around her shoulders, lit a lantern, and headed for the door. "I shall now pay Mr. Dinkins a visit."

Mrs. Crowder exited the fishhouse. Clem rubbed a clean spot in the kitchen window with his shirtsleeve and looked out. He saw the flickering lantern light cross the pier, bob down the ladder (nearly thirty feet with the low tide), and move over the float to the hatch of the lobster car. He knew damned well that Mrs. Crowder could not pass up the chance to see Blinky's remains, thus giving her an enviable position amongst the town's gossipmongers.

Clem turned back to the stove and plopped the fillets into the boiling stewpot. He plundered the cupboard for potatoes. There were only two, small and shriveled. These he quartered and added to the pot. Further back were several other pitiful vegetables that had no business in a chowder, and he added these as well.

With supper underway, Clem peered back out the window. The pinprick of lantern light was low and steady now. Quickly the light jerked upward, swayed back and forth, then raced back along the float, up the ladder, and across the pier.

Clem smiled. *Mrs. Crowd-ah's a li'l unsettled by wot she saw. Bet she cahn't wait t' tell th' ladies in th' mahnin.*

He reached for the seasonings on the overhead shelf.

Mrs. Crowder exploded through the door. "My Lord, Mr. Crowd-ah! They're huge!"

That was *not* what he'd expected to hear.

Clem's newly found basil fell right into the chowder, canister and all. "Christ a'mighty, Muth-ah! Wot're ye goin on about?"

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"Yer catch today. Th' size of 'em!"

"Why, Blinky's allers been a li'l squirt." He fished the basil canister out with a spoon. "An' he cert'ly ain't no bigg-ah now."

"Not Blinky, chum-fer-brains! Yer *uth-ah* catch!"

"Mmmm...not muchuva day, as I recall. Los' a pot 'cuz o' Blinky. Discov-ahed a hole in my new oilskins. Pulled a couple-three good-sized 'uns — "

"Good-sized 'uns? Three of 'em lopst-ahs 're bigger'n ole Clawdius hisself!" The family pet did not stir at the sound of his name.

"Cum now, Muth-ah. I think I'd rememb-ah a thing like that."

"Go look fer yeself."

Clem pulled his boots and slicker back on and followed his wife down to the float. Mrs. Crowder held the lantern high. He lifted the trap door of the car and peered down.

"By Gorry! Ye ev-ah clap an eye on such a lopst-ah? Two! No, three of 'em! They's gut t' weigh in near twenny pouns apiece!" Clem turned to his wife. "I guess I weren't payin no mind this mahnin. Wot wi' findin Blinky an all. Lessee, at twenty-eight cents a pound," Clem squinted his eyes and worked his fingers on the mental math, "we're prac'ally well-to-do!"

"Really, Clem. Folks prefer th' two pound-ahs."

Clem rolled up his sleeves, plunged both arms into the icy water of the lobster car, and pulled out one of the monstrous shellfish. "Oh, folks'll pay top doll-ah fer sumpin speshul like this. Top doll-ah!"

Mrs. Crowder eyed the lobster from several angles. "Why, Mr. Crowd-ah, how'd ye trap that thing? It's too big fer a convent'nal pot."

"These weren't in no pot, woman, they were muckled onta Blinky hisself."

"Well I'll be," said Mrs. Crowder. "Fer all we know, Mr. Crowd-ah, lopst-ahs this size might be common. Cud be thirty-, forty-pound-ahs stompin 'bout th' dahk depths o' th' ocean floor. Jus' mebbe no one's ev-ah built a pot big 'nuff t' trap one."

An idea struck Clem like a thunderclap. If anyone had asked, he'd swear the idea was entirely his own, with no input from Mrs. Crowder whatsoever.

* * *

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Dunky Drinkwater was a creature of habit. He made his rounds through the little community of Clapboard on a set schedule of weekly rotations, visiting everyone from the oh-so-lonely Widow Baudelaire on Cobblestone Way to crotchety old Gargamel Stinch at Town's End. Everyone knew Dunky's schedule and everyone enjoyed his company. With clockwork exactness, Dunky waltzed into the Crowder fishhouse on Tuesday evening, at a quarter-past-six, on the dot.

"How goes it, Clem, how goes it." Dunky entered without so much as a knock.

"Not too shabby, Dunky. Grab a seat."

Dunky positioned himself in front of a bucket of pogies and began stuffing bait bags. His social calls were always an even mixture of work and play, and he never shirked the chance to lend a hand with the daily chores.

"Heard yer missus cum home from werk yestidy, Clem."

"Ayuh. She's gone t' town, spreadin th' tidin's o' poor Blinky," Clem said around a mouthful of nails. He pulled one out and lightly tapped it into a wooden slat. A few more oak laths, plus knit heads, and he'd be finished. "Don' expect 'er home till ever'one on Clabberd's heard th' story twice."

"God-awful shame 'bout Blinky," Dunky said, mesmerized by Clem's rhythmic tap-tap-tapping of the hammer. He watched Clem sink nails into the contraption, one by one, but couldn't make heads nor tails of what it was supposed to be. "Wotchya throwin togeth-ah, Clem?"

"New poverty-box." Eastern Mainers call them "traps." They are "pots" to those west of Penobscot Bay. A Clapboard Islander prefers the term "poverty-box," regardless of how well he does in the business.

Dunky gave it a second look. "Looks a li'l peculi-ah, Clem."

"It's jus' a reg'l-ah trap, Dunky. Only bigg-ah."

"I see it, now." Dunky recognized the familiar laths, bows, sills, and runners. Its purpose remained unaccountable in his mind. "Have ye lost yer senses, Clem?"

"Doaw!" Clem spat out the nails and set down his hammer. "Foller me."

The two men walked down the wharf to the lobster car. Clem reached both arms deep into the hatch and pulled out two of the giant lobsters.

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Dunky let out a long whistle. "Them's beauts! Wotchya gonna do wid 'em?"

"I'm keepin one fer th' supp-ah table — bett-ah make that two, one fer misself an' one fer th' missus, or I'll get an ear full — an t' other I'll sell on th' open mahket."

Dunky nodded his head, as if in agreement, but his eyes were those of a man lost deep in thought. "Ye cud do that, Clem, ye cud do that. But it's an awful shame t' waste 'em."

Clem pursed his lips together and furrowed his brow. "Whadduya mean, waste 'em?"

"If they were mine, I'd put 'em t' good use. Ye know, grease palms, strengthen associations. Curry favor wid th' Pow-ahs That Be, so t' speak." Dunky winked and lightly poked Clem's ribs with his elbow. "Things cud run a lot smooth-ah aroun here, if ye foller me."

Clem did not. "I see yer lips flappin, Duncan Drinkwat-ah, but there ain't nuthin but hoss-shit comin out. I'm a fish-ahman! I ain't gut no palms need greasin."

"I'm talkin bus'ness, Clem. Yer also a bus'nessman, ain'tcha? Take Saul Newberg — "

"Saul, the wholesal-ah? He ain't done nuthin but rob me blind fer thurty years!"

"But 'magine how grateful he'd be if ye give 'im one o' them lopst-ahs as a peace-offerin. A real show-piece, that thing, 'specially wid th' Annular Clambake cummin nex' month. Mightn't he be grateful 'nuff t' staht given ye bett-ah than middleman prices?"

Clem considered this, seriously. "Mebbe he would at that."

"An' don' ferget th' town selec'men. Nev-ah herts t' be fav'rable wid th' gum-mint."

New England town meetings were notoriously biased and cliquish. It would be nice for his opinion to finally matter in the eyes of the town selectmen. They might even back him this time when he approached the Zoning Committee about an extension to his wharf.

"Hell, Dunky, wot wi' three selec'men plus Saul Newberg, that palm-greasin 'll cost me more lopst-ahs than I gut."

"Can'tcha catch sum more?"

Dunky's idea had merit. The Crowders were one of the old families

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of Clapboard Island, founding members of the original settlement and well regarded for the most part, but they had always been poor fishermen, generation after generation, and never enjoyed a high standing in the community. Even the Drinkwaters had success stories, here and there, in their family tree. Why couldn't a Crowder, just once, gain a little recognition?

His mind wandered to the Clapboard Island Annual Clambake, only one month away. The sky was calm and blue, the air filled with the scent of sweet corn and apple pie. Seated along the great length of the traditional checker-clothed table were Clapboard's most distinguished families: the Stoddards, the Mullinses, the Sanes. All their money and all their clout could not get them what they desired this day. That coveted position, determined by popular vote, was filled by the newest member of their island elite: Mr. Clement O. Crowder, Guest of Honor.

"Ayuh," Clem said. "I can catch more."

MRS. CROWDER wrapped her shawl closely about her, refusing to concede to the cold salt-sea air. Curiosity alone kept her on the wharf. She was determined to wait for her husband's return, eager to learn of the outcome of his day's work. Under normal circumstances, Mrs. Crowder was not so attentive to her husband's business, and traditionally paid little attention to his daily activities. But she knew his oversized poverty-box had been set amongst his sou'east string of traps last week, and today he would collect it.

Before long *The Belching Spider* appeared on the horizon, cleared the harbor buoy, and headed in for home. Mrs. Crowder idly watched her husband lash *The Spider* to its mooring buoy, climb into his punt and row for shore, manning the oars from a standup position, a habit peculiar to lobster fishermen as a whole. When he was within hearing-distance, she let ring from the dock, "How's th' fishin?"

"Ter'ble!" was his only reply.

No more was said. They gathered his things from the punt and returned to the fishhouse. Mrs. Crowder pulled the rocking chair up near the potbelly stove, reached for the twine in its holdfast, and began to knit. Head-knitting was a routine nighttime activity in the lobstering industry, and Clem joined her with his own pair of needles.

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An hour passed before a word was said. It was Mrs. Crowder who finally broke the silence.

"Mebbe it's th' bait, Mr. Crowd-ah."

"How's that?"

"Th' bait. A lahge lopst-ah mus' have a lahge app'tite. Cahn't 'magine it's satisfied wi' piddly redfish brim or pollack heads on a baitin iron. Th' bait's gut t' be big as Billy-Be-Damned, I figger."

"Th' bait," repeated Clem. The suggestion turned his wheels. Bigger than redfish brim. Larger than pollack heads. Just last month his brother-in-law had complained of woodchuck varmints overrunning his farm. *Too bad th' ungodly things cudn't be put t' sum use.*

A smile spread across his ruddy face. He turned to Mrs. Crowder. "I think we shud pay yer bruth-ah a visit tomorrer."

Cornelius Cobb was a subsistence farmer of scanty success. Neither bean nor pea saw fit to bloom in his fields, where crabgrass grew just fine. His cows and chickens had healthy appetites, almost supernaturally healthy, yet somehow never got around to producing milk and eggs. The finicky nature of his pigs kept them lean as rakes.

But Cornelius's mind was more fertile than his fields. No predicament was too great, not even the lackluster crops and livestock of the triple-mortgaged Cobb Farm, and a solution presented itself to Cornelius in short order. When on the horns of a dilemma, is it not fair turnabout to put the dilemma on the horns? Cornelius became a goater.

Goats are notoriously easy to care for. Their ironbound frames and rugged dispositions make them hearty additions to the most prosaic farmyard. Cornelius eagerly traded three skinny pigs for Nate Grumman's tawny she-goat. Things went par for the course, by Cobb standards.

Clem and Mrs. Crowder arrived that morning to find Cornelius Cobb out behind the barn, puzzling over one tawny and very dead she-goat.

"How be ye, Corn?"

"Gorry!" Corn jumped from the unexpected sound of his brother-in-law's voice. "Wot brings ye to th' mainland, Clem?"

He turned and saw that Clem was not alone.

"Abby!" He stepped forward and gave his sister a hug. Corn and Mrs. Crowder had not seen each other in quite some time.

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"B'fore you two get all busy reacquaintin, I'd like t' take care o' sum bus'ness...." Clem stopped mid-thought and looked down. "Wot happened to yer dog?"

Corn followed Clem's gaze. "That ain't no dog, Clem, that's my new goat."

"Don't know much 'bout fahmin, Corn, but I think ye ov-ah-milked 'er. She's all tuck-ahed out."

"No-o, no, Clem. She's dead. Don't know why, neither. She were in fine fettle when I traded fer her."

Clem bent down and studied the goat from head to hoof. "Wotchya gonna do wi' this trashy thing?"

"Beats th' Hellfire outta me." Corn worked his fingers through his chin-whiskers. "Beef, pork, an' lamb 're good fer th' meat block, but I don' know no butch-ah that carries roast o' goat." He bent down, plucked a long blade of hayseed grass and wedged it between his teeth. "An' unlike sheep, th' wool ain't worth clippin." Corn ruminated some more. "Cum t' think of it, that thing weren't worth much alive, no how. Sure, th' milk's healthy an' nourishin, but only ole folks buy goat's milk. Use it fer their aliment'ry ailments. So's all m' payin custom-ahs a'ready gut one foot in th' grave." Corn looked down on the goat in newfound disgust. "The beast gave damn li'l milk besides. T' tell ye th' truth, I dunno wot people do wi' *live* goats, let alone *dead* goats."

Clem was one step ahead of him. "I know wot *I'd* do...."

Hand-over-fist, Clem yanked up the pot-warp in eager anticipation. Only three days had passed since he'd lowered this particular pot, but it was baited with goat and he could wait no longer. Luck was with him: his brother-in-law had practically given him the trashy thing, for Christ's Sake, and wanted nothing in return! Nothing except one of the giant lobsters for the upcoming Annual Clambake. Something he was about to have in plenty, he reckoned.

Clem continued to work the pot-warp up, and from time to time wished he'd fished with something less weighty than a she-goat, perhaps a woodchuck varmint or two, or one of Corn's skinny pigs. Long minutes later the trap breached the surface and Clem heaved it over the stern.

His heart skipped a beat. The slick-furred goat was not alone inside.

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A green strand of seaweed laced both horns. Clem opened the trap door, reached in, and removed the seaweed. There was a sea urchin. No, make that two. And a starfish. His eyes scanned up one side of the stiffened carcass and down the other. There was nothing more.

For Clem, the day was over and he returned to the fishhouse. Mrs. Crowder was not at home, which did not add to his despondency. He eased into his favorite rocking chair.

Without so much as a knock, let alone the customary "come in," the door swung open and in walked Dunky Drinkwater.

"Why, Dunky!" Clem looked at his watch. "It ain't a quart-ah pas' six. Hell, it ain't even Tuesd'y!"

"I knowed it, Clem," Dunky said. "My timin's all off. Right now I shud be etin supp-ah wi' th' Murdochs. But I jus had t' see th' hero o' Clabberd Isle!"

"Hero! Wot a damn fool you are."

"Not so," Dunky said. "I'm lookin direc'ly at this year's guest o' honor fer th' Annular Clambake."

"Me? How's that?"

"Simple. When I tol' all those high mucky-mucks 'bout th' gen'rous gifts ye were presentin at th' Bake, well, they u-maminously voted Clem Crowd-ah fer guest o' honor, han's down."

"Ye...ye tol' 'em 'bout th' lopst-ahs!"

"Ayuh. One fer th' Mayor, one fer Saul Newberg, th' wholesal-ah, one fer Patty Shenanigan, one fer — "

"Patty Shenanigan! Where'n Hell's Half-Acre does he fit in!"

"He's th' new fish warden, Clem. Cahn't leave out ole Patty. Lessee, where was I...oh yeah, one each fer Moody, Dunmore, an' Pratt — "

"Damn those selec'men an' damn you!" Clem shook his fist in the air.

Dunky stepped back. "Clem Crowd-ah! Wot's gut inta you? I thut ye'd be happy as a clam on a cummin tide! Think o' it, Clem...guest o' honor, fer all o' Clabberd t' see. All b'cuz o' them lopst-ahs ye gut." A dubious look crossed Dunky's face. "Ye *do* gut them lopst-ahs, don'tchya?"

Clem stared beyond the walls, lost deep in his own private reverie. *Hero*, Dunky had said. *Clem Crowder, the Hero of Clapboard Island.* It had a certain ring. *Clem Crowder, Guest of Honor of the Clapboard Island*

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Annual Clambake. That sounded proper. *Clem Crowder, Friend and Equal to Mucky-Mucks.* He liked the sound of *that.*

"Clem. Clem! Ye gut them lopst-ahs, right?"

"Ayuh!" Clem ruffled from his woolgathering. "I gut them lopst-ahs."

That night Clem lay awake in bed. The day's events ran through him like Mexican water through a first-time tourist. He was unable to flush them from his mind.

Mrs. Crowder had returned home shortly after Dunky's visit. She was fast asleep beside him now, her bellowed breathing a freight train on the intake, its whistle on the exhalation. It roused then lulled him in his inward reflections. He hadn't told her he'd checked his goat-baited poverty-box, and she hadn't asked.

There was nothing to tell, really. The size of the trap didn't seem to matter. Neither did the size of the bait. Nothing seemed to be working. And now, thanks to Dunky, there was more on the line than ever. Clapboard's elite did not take broken promises lightly. Especially not from the likes of a Crowder.

He needed a solution and he needed it fast. He needed a surefire, tried-and-true way to entice those lobsters into the boat and onto the supper table.

He needed Blinky.

Everyone was intimidated by Mordecai Malbon. Not everyone admitted it, least of all the no-nonsense old-dogs of Clapboard Island, but everyone felt a distinct uneasiness in the presence of the local mortician. Clem was no exception to this general condition. He wrung the nervousness from his hands as he stood in the funeral parlor and addressed the back of the shadowy figure.

"Pahdon me, Mr. Malbon...."

Mordecai turned and stepped out of the shadows. He was tall and thin. And white. No corpse had ever been as white as Mordecai Malbon. The moonlight glow of his skin contrasted against his coal black suit. "May I help you?"

Clem removed his hat and anxiously worked it between his hands, then inexplicably placed it back on his head, and finally took it off again. "I...I'd like to talk wi' you 'bout a...a pers'nal matt-ah."

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Mordecai slowly swept his long arm in one continuous arc, indicating a door. "Step into my office."

Clem walked in and seated himself before the huge mahogany desk, Mordecai behind it. No pleasantries or amenities were offered to Clem, as he might have expected from a professional establishment, but the ways of normal businessmen were not the ways of Mordecai Malbon. For a moment, nothing was said at all. Then Clem cleared his throat and began, almost apologetically, with, "It's 'bout Blinky Dinkins."

"What about him?" said the mortician.

"Y'see, I'm th' one who fished Blinky outta th' drink. I brung 'im in an' called th' author'ties th' nex' mahnin an' they cum down t' th' wharf, an'...."

"Mr. Crowder, this is Clapboard Island. I've heard all about it."

"Ayuh, ayuh. I was jus' wunderin wot b'cum o' ole Blinky, tha's all. How ye disposed o' th' body, things like 'at."

"The Dinkinses have a family plot on the mainland. Mr. Dinkins will be interred there."

"So...Blinky ain't quite buried yet?"

"No. Not an uncommon occurrence here, Mr. Crowder. Funerals are often postponed due to rough seas when the body can't be brought to the mainland. This rocky island isn't exactly suitable for grave-digging. What few cemeteries we have were filled years ago. But you know all this, Mr. Crowder. Your father was one of the last people buried on Clapboard."

"Ayuh, I rememb-ah. Th' ground was so poor, we had t' add fertiliz-ah jus' t' get his soul t' rise."

Mordecai's own heritage could only be called atypical, at least by local standards. His mother had been a Shaker, a woman driven mad by the guilt of her solitary experience with lust. His father had been none other than Three-Legged Pierre, the most lascivious man whom ever hung his hat on Clapboard Island, a man of French-Canadian stock given to questionable activities, both morally and legally. It was a miracle, some say, that Mordecai turned out as well as he did.

"Unless you're attending the funeral, Mr. Crowder," said Mordecai, "the reason behind your interest in Mr. Dinkins's remains eludes me."

"Y'see, wot mos' folks don't know is, when I fished Blinky outta th' drink, he was—" Clem spaced his hands apart "—he was sportin a lopst-ah like this. Three of 'em, act'ally. You nev-ah seen th' like!"

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"Get to the point, Mr. Crowder."

"Them lopst-ahs...I tried ever'thin t' catch one agin. I fished th' same spot. Nuthin. I rigged me a lahge trap, veeery accommodatin. Didn' werk. Even fished wi' a tawny she-goat I gut from m' in-law. No good."

"You," Mordecai leaned forward. His face pulled and contorted into something never before witnessed by the eyes of Clem, nor by the eyes of any man, woman, or child on Clapboard. Mordecai was smiling. Clem was scared witless. "You want the body back."

Clem broke into a cold sweat. He suddenly realized he had made a severe mistake in coming here. He stumbled from the chair and backed away, stammering and confused. Mordecai's long skeletal arm reached forward, grabbed Clem by the shoulder, and pulled him back.

"What a black heart you have, Mr. Crowder," Mordecai hissed from his grotesque mockery of a smile. "How wicked a mind."

"Mist-ah...Mist-ah Malbon, I think ye misunderstand — "

"Silence." The undertaker looked at Clem with cold, reptilian eyes. "I understand all too perfectly. Oh how I understand, even better than you understand your own twisted self."

"It ain't nuthin like that, I swear — "

"The body is yours."

Clem sat, dumbfounded. "It is?"

"I am scheduled to transport Mr. Dinkins to the mainland tomorrow morning. We will meet on the open sea, you and I, and I will transfer the body to your boat. We will add ballast to the coffin to match Mr. Dinkins's weight. The pallbearers shall feel the heft of a hundred-and-thirty pound man. His is a closed-casket funeral, for obvious reasons, and no one will be the wiser."

"Where's th' catch?" Clem asked. In his experience, there was always a catch.

"Catch, Mr. Crowder? You disappoint me. I do it because it is morally objectionable. I thought you of all people would understand this. Ah, well. You are a Yankee trader, first and foremost. Very well. I will take one of your extraordinary lobsters for service rendered. Surely that will assuage your merchant soul?"

Clem nodded.

"If indeed," the mortician added, that sinister smile returning, "you have a soul."

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Clem turned and fled.

The rendezvous went as planned. Mordecai and Clem met on the open sea. Blinky was duly transferred to *The Belching Spider*. Mordecai continued on to the mainland.

The corpse now occupied the very same position in the bilge as it had nearly two weeks ago, when Clem first hauled it over the stern. Mordecai had "cleaned up" Blinky since Clem last saw him, in a futile attempt to conceal the effects of sea-exposure and the coroner's knife. The body was still marred but, all in all, the mortician had done a passable job of restoring Blinky to his former ugly self. Clem finished the makeover with a touch of his own: an anchor for an ankle-bracelet and a necktie fashioned of pot-warp and camouflaged buoy.

Out of respect, Clem recited a makeshift eulogy before heaving Blinky over the stern and into the sea.

A STORM BREWED off the hardscrabble coasts of Nova Scotia, boiled over, then spilled its seething winds against the rugged shores of Maine. *The Belching Spider* was lashed by the icy gale. She climbed and slalomed the mountainous whitecaps on her journey outbound from Clapboard Island. No sane man would venture out-of-doors in such weather, let alone put to sea, but no sane man would consider Clem Crowder among his fold.

Clem's heading drove him directly past his sou'east traps toward a little camouflaged buoy off away from his main string. The boat rocked violently. He hooked the buoy and pulled taut the pot-warp. Slowly he pulled. The weight was considerable, much greater than a wood-slated trap with a bedeviled goat sinker. Several times he bent the pot-warp around a cleat to rest his muscles and catch his breath. He was relentless. The rain drove down in thick, black sheets. The world was reduced to a single universe: *The Belching Spider*, the pot-buoy, and the fisherman himself.

Clem wrenched and tugged, yanked and pulled. Just when he thought he could pull no longer, the grinning head of Blinky Dinkins bobbed up through the surf. His glass eye gleamed in a jagged flash of lightning. The boat pitched and yawed, and once nearly spilled Clem to a black, watery

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grave. He planted both feet against the gunwale to brace himself against the turbulence, grabbed Blinky under his rigor-mortised arms, and hauled. The grinning idiot skull peered over the stern.

C'mon, ye sombitch. Clem gritted his teeth and tugged harder. Inch-by-hard-fought-inch, Blinky slithered up the boat. Suddenly the body let loose from the anchor and vaulted over the stern. Clem was knocked flat on his back. He lay dazed in the bilge water, pinned to the floor by the weight of the waterlogged carcass. A wave of panic struck him and he hysterically thrashed at the slick body, but only managed to slide it just a little ways down.

Clem sputtered up rainwater and peered through the soupy drizzle. There was a black hump on the rise of Blinky's back, an enormous angular silhouette. Clem blinked hard to clear his eyes. Whatever it was, it was no more than ten inches from his face. The inky night cloaked all distinction, but it seemed to be moving.

A sharp crack of lightning unveiled the angular knob. Its great claws and spindly antennae flexed to the beat of the lobsterman's heart.

Clem screamed with delight.

So it went. Not every day, not even every other day, but occasionally Blinky played host to a flesh-craving, monster-clawed shellfish leviathan. In the span of a month, Clem collected nine such lobsters, nearly enough to fulfill his obligations.

For her part, Mrs. Crowder was tickled pink. She thought to share the limelight of Mr. Crowder's notoriety at the Clapboard Island Annual Clambake. She was completely unaware of the true events surrounding his success. The good fortune was blissfully attributed to her brother's dead goat. Besides Clem, no one was the wiser. Save one.

And for the first time in his miserable life, that one was to visit a friend. Clem broke from his weekend midmorning five-egg breakfast to a solemn rapping on the fishhouse door. He rose, ready to admonish Dunky for his irregular schedule of late. He opened the door. Dunky was nowhere to be found. In his place was Mordecai Malbon.

"Good morning, my confidant," said Mordecai. Rather than remove his black stovepipe hat, the mortician ducked under the doorframe and entered the fishhouse, uninvited.

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"Mr. Malbon!"

"Please," the mortician said, that horrible smile returning, "I must insist you call me Mordecai. Or Mordy. No one's ever called me Mordy, but I've always wanted them to."

"W-Why," Clem scrambled for words, "Wotchya *doin* here?"

"Just a social call."

"Social call?"

"We are kindred spirits, you and I."

"We are?"

"Yes. How's Mr. Dinkins faring?"

Clem's head was a whirlwind. The stench and filth of a rotting corpse he could handle; the lies-by-omission he didn't tell his wife he could handle; the presence of the morbid undertaker he could not. The fact that Mordecai Malbon considered him a "kindred spirit" was disturbing. He felt like a man in league with the devil.

"I repeat. How's Mr. Dinkins faring?"

"Huh? Blinky? Oh, not so well, really. He's stahtin t' wear thin, if ye catch my meanin. Not much meat aroun th' bones anymore. I'll be lucky t' get anuth-ah lopst-ah outta 'im."

"Just as I suspected," Mordecai said. "A replacement is in order."

"A replacement?"

"Certainly. Courtesy of my half-brother, Toussaint." Mordecai Malbon had no shortage of half-siblings, thanks to the wanton behavior of Three-Legged Pierre. He reached into his inner coat pocket and produced a sealed envelope. "Give this to Toussaint. He'll understand."

Mordecai placed the letter in Clem's hand. Clem looked at it blankly. Good-Foot Toussaint was a gravedigger on the mainland with a reputation that rivaled his father's. Clem did not know the man personally, but had seen Good-Foot around town and was confident he could recognize him if he wanted to. But did he want to? A feeling of helplessness washed over him. He no longer felt in control of his own destiny. Five more lobsters would fulfill his obligations, but at what price?

Mrs. Crowder walked through the front door. In all the confusion Clem had never stopped to consider the whereabouts of his wife.

"Mornin, Mr. Crowd-ah," she said. She pulled the shawl from her shoulders and caught sight of the spindly mortician. Their eyes locked

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like two wary predators, each sizing up the potential threat of the other. Eventually Mrs. Crowder managed an "Mornin, Mr. Malbon," though her voice had dropped a notch and she continued to glare.

"Mrs. Crowder." Mordecai removed his tall hat and bowed ever-so-slightly at the waist.

"Abby!" Clem forced a smile on his face. "Where ye been, de-ah?"

Mrs. Crowder shifted her glare from Mordecai to Clem. Her husband was acting in a sheepish manner. Her husband was never sheepish.

"Jus' cum back from my meetin wi' th' Upright Women's League O' Decency." She was the president of this women's group, a preachy taskforce bent on keeping the immoral minority in constant check. Her contributions to the League of Decency were many and varied, though her schoolmarming schedule only allowed her to attend one meeting every few years.

"Mr. Malbon," she added, regarding Mordecai from the corner of her eye, "th' League has sum few male memb-ahs as well. Perhaps ye shud drop by nex' meetin."

The mortician's lips twitched as if on the verge of that unsightly smile. "You have a singular wit, Mrs. Crowder."

Clem broke into a sweat. The tension in the room was climbing. He was not adept at easing such social situations. Luckily, he didn't need to. Mordecai placed his hat back upon his head and sidled toward the door.

"Now I must take my leave," announced Mordecai. "I have business to attend to, and so does your husband, Mrs. Crowder."

Before Mrs. Crowder could completely close the door behind him, Mordecai grabbed the doorknob and thrust his head back inside. "Farewell, Clem."

"G'bye." Clem tilted his hand in a half-hearted wave. The mortician's head remained in the door. Reluctantly, Clem added "...Mordy."

When the door shut completely, Mrs. Crowder turned to her husband in unbridled surprise. "Mordy? Sing Fie! Wot sorta bus'ness has that sorry undertak-ah have wi' you, that's wot I'd like t' know, Mr. Crowd-ah!"

"Oh, him?" Clem clambered for the words. "That man's collectin donations, s'all. Sumpin 'bout an orph'nage. Well, bett-ah get m' shut-eye, gotta hit th' wat-ah early tomorrer. G'night, Mrs. Crowd-ah."

Clem scurried off to bed. It was the middle of the day.

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The reports of Good-Foot Toussaint's lewdness were not greatly exaggerated. Clem endured two hours' worth of stories about drunken escapades, barroom brawls, loose women, and yes, even a murder or two, before he could swing the conversation around to the point of his visit.

Clem had arrived at the cemetery that morning to find Good-Foot up on Memorial Hill, hidden from view in a six-foot hole of his own making. If not for the clods of dirt leaping from the ground along the horizon, Clem may never have found the gravedigger at all.

"Hello," Clem said into the hole. "Mr. Toussaint Malbon?"

"*Oui*?" said the man. He set down his shovel, pulled himself from the grave-in-the-making, and extended his hand in greeting.

Clem grabbed the meaty paw and shook. The Malbon half-brothers could not be more unalike. Good-Foot Toussaint was a barrel-chested hulk, as broad as Mordecai was narrow, with rich, farmer's-tanned skin. He was gregarious to a fault, without an ounce of Mordecai's innate reserve, and seemed to have no limit to the stories he could tell. Several times during the past two hours Clem had wished Toussaint possessed at least some of his half-brother's aloofness.

"Speakin o' gougin a man's eye out wi' yer big toe, I've gut a lett-ah here from yer bruth-ah Mordecai," said Clem, seizing the opportunity to redirect the conversation when Good-Foot paused in the middle of his story to light a cigarette. He was indeed curious to know if Good-Foot got the whore after removing her boyfriend's eye with his toe, but there were time constraints to consider and Mrs. Crowder would soon be questioning his whereabouts.

Good-Foot took Mordecai's letter, sat down on the nearest tombstone, indicated for Clem to do the same, and began to read. His eyes grew wider as they passed back and forth over the letter, and he stopped only once to light a new cigarette off the old one.

"*Sacre Bleu!*" he said when he'd finished. "M'sieur Crow-dair, you too have ze stories for telling, eh?" He carefully refolded the letter and tucked it in his shirt pocket.

Clem gulped. Now he wished he'd read the letter himself before handing it over. What exactly had Mordecai written? How much had he told Toussaint about their "arrangement"?

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"You are a lucky bastard, *mon ami!*" Good-Foot boomed. His voice rolled off Memorial Hill like thunder. "I have zhust ze dead guy for you!"

Clem shrieked and fell from his tombstone. He looked around for passers-by. The cemetery was deserted. Still, the gravedigger talked entirely too loud for his taste and he shushed him just the same.

"Follow me!" Good-Foot was seemingly unaware that he had been shushed.

Clem was led to a stony, vine-covered crypt on the far side of Memorial Hill. Good-Foot unchained the rusty door and shoved it open with one powerful arm. He motioned for Clem to step inside. Clem poked his head through the door and looked around. When his eyes adjusted to the dark, he saw three bodies lying on three cement slabs, a man and two women.

"Which of zhese you like, huh?"

"Ye want me t' choose b'tween these three?" Clem had never chosen a corpse before.

"*Oui*. Ze select-shon eez not large zhis time of year."

"I...I dunno." Clem swallowed hard. "This ole woman will b' fine, I suppose. Don' make no diff'rence, really."

"Good choice, *m'sieur*. She will bring you much plezh-air." Good-Foot unceremoniously scooped up the old woman and slung her over his shoulder. "*Bonsoir, ma mère*. I will mees you." With his free hand, Good-Foot wiped a tear from his eye and headed for the door.

"Muh mair...why, that's yer muth-ah?" Clem cried. "I had no idea! Set 'er down, set 'er down, I'll choose anuth-ah!"

"As you wish." Good-Foot slapped the body back down on its cold, hard slab.

Clem inhaled a deep breath and slowly released it. "Wot 'bout these other two. Any relation?"

"No, no. Ze wo-man, she eez from a very prominent family. As you can zee, she eez young and ve-ery beautiful." He indicated the other corpse. "Ze man, well, zhat was heez paup-air's grave I was digging. Not zo clean as ze wo-man." Good-Foot spat on the man's forehead and rubbed off a dirt smudge with his shirtsleeve. Clem flinched. "Eet comes down to your pair-sonal prefay-rahns, *m'sieur*."

"Well. Since one of 'em's goin und-ah in a paup-ah's grave anyhow, I might as well put 'im t' good use. Gimme that man."

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"*Hnnh-HUNH!*" expressed Good-Foot, with a peculiar look in his eye. "Ze man eet eez. Eet takes all kinds in zis crazy world, no? I will deliv-air heem to your house tonight."

"No, no," Clem said. "Ye bett-ah bring 'im t' my boat direc'ly. Wudn't want th' missus catchin a glimpse of 'im."

"Ah, *oui*. Ze miss-ez," Good-Foot said, and winked. "You are too much, *m'sieur*."

The gravedigger's responses confused Clem to no end, and for the umpteenth time he wondered about the contents of Mordecai's letter.

"Mordecai men-shons some-zing very strange in hees lett-air to me," said Good-Foot, bringing up the very subject on Clem's mind. He busily stuffed the pauper's carcass into a long, burlap body-bag.

"Ayuh? Wot's that?"

"He men-shons a grand lop-stair zat I am to receive as pay-mont. Eez zees true?"

"Ayuh. If that's a'right wi' you?"

"All right? Eet eez outrageous!" blared Good-Foot. He slapped Clem on the back and nearly knocked him over. His belly laughter echoed through the tiny crypt and finally ended in a coughing fit, which did not subside until another cigarette was lit. Between puffs he added, "I weel deliv-air your new friend tonight, und-air zee cov-air of darkness. You weel find heem waiting for you in your boat in zee morning."

Clem nodded his head and made for the door. Just outside the crypt he turned and said, "By th' way...did Mordecai menchin anythin else in that lett-ah?"

Good-Foot grinned, and smoke billowed out from between his teeth. "Mordecai is a seeck fuck-air, eh? But you, *M'sieur* Crow-dair, you take zee cake!"

Clem turned and fled.

The new corpse fished just fine. Not any better than Blinky, mind you, but no worse either. Clem anchored the body near his nor'east string of traps, with no success, then tried several other hot spots throughout his fishing territory. These all proved barren. Eventually he set the body at the end of his sou'east string, smack dab in Blinky Dinkin's terrain. It bore two immense lobsters the very next day.

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As for Blinky, he disappeared one morning and never returned. Clem figured he'd finally broke apart and slipped away from his anchor, taking a much-needed retirement from the wear-and-tear life of lobster baiting. Or perhaps he was jealous of the new corpse on the block and decided he didn't like the competition. Either way, he was gone.

Back on the island, the townsfolk hustled and bustled in preparation for the Annual Clambake, now less than a week away. Mrs. Crowder was right in the thick of things, making sure everything was in order down to the last detail. She focused distinctly on the Lobster Presentation Ceremony, since Mr. Crowder figured prominently in it. The Crowder name would be remembered this day for the grace of her husband's delivery, not because he bungled things again. She would make sure of that.

Monday morning Clem took stock of his lobster inventory. He counted thirteen of the rugged brutes. Dunky topped the guest list at fourteen mucky-mucks. One more lobster and he could call it quits.

The sky threatened rain. Clem spent the rest of the day in the fishhouse playing solitaire.

Tuesday. *The Belching Spider* worked its way through bobbing scraps of driftwood and tangled masses of seaweed, stirred up from the previous night's storm. Clem whistled an old sea chantey his father had taught him. The camouflaged pot-buoy bobbed into sight. Clem gaffed it, pulled it close, grabbed ahold of the pot-warp with both hands, gave a good yank, and fell over backward.

"Wot 'n Sam Hill!" Clem sat up. The buoy lay in his lap, along with about five feet of pot-warp. He picked up the frayed end and held it before his eyes.

"Musta cum loose in th' squall." Clem sat on the floor of his boat. He was no longer in the disposition for whistling. "One lopst-ah shy. One lopst-ah shy. Now. Wotchya gonna do, Mr. Crowd-ah?" He continued to sit. He continued to stare at the frayed end of pot-warp.

The sun reached its zenith then slowly dropped from the sky.

Several hours later Clem returned to the fishhouse. He found Mrs. Crowder in a state of hectic activity. Lively she folded clothes and packed them into her travel trunk.

"Wotchya doin, leavin town?" Clem watched his wife make one last frantic sweep of the tiny fishhouse, then snap shut the latches on her

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trunk. "It's cuz o' this Guest o' Honor bizness, in' it? I see! Cahn't stand t' see me successful, cahn ye?"

"Don' know, Mr. Crowd-ah, I ain't nev-ah seen it. Guess I won't this time, neith-ah. Cap'n McGill'cuddy's shippin out. He's picked up freight an headin fer th' Chiny Sea."

Clem dully absorbed the news. "When ye leavin?"

"Now." She hefted the trunk up with both arms. "An I was lookin forward t' the Clambake this year too."

"Ayuh. Th' Clambake." One lobster shy. For want of a single shellfish, the proudest day of his life would fall to rack and ruin.

"Well, I'm off, Mr. Crowd-ah. Guess ye'll have t' give m' lop-stah to someone else."

Realization came slow to Clem. "Yer...lopst-ah...." But when it hit, it hit big. "Yer lopst-ah! Ye won't be needin yer lopst-ah fer th' Clambake!"

"Course not. Now walk me down to m' ship."

With a grand gesture, Clem motioned for the door. "Ladies first!" He looped his arm around hers, leaped in the air, and clicked his heels together. Mrs. Crowder knew her departures were always a cause for celebration, but she'd never seen her husband quite this excited. The two walked arm in arm down to Pier Four and McGillicuddy's ship.

"Have a wunnerful trip, de-ah." Clem pecked his wife on the cheek. She stiffened from shock.

"Mr. Crowd-ah. Control yerself. Ye'll hook yerself a lewd reputation." She walked up the gangway and was gone.

Clem was off the hook. Thirteen lobsters for thirteen guests.

CLEM RETURNED HOME in a good mood indeed. Mrs. Crowder was gone, not to return for another three years. His lobster problem was solved. No need to bother with any more corpses, morticians, or gravediggers. The Annual Clambake was but four days away.

Clem fetched a bottle of rotgut from under the loose floorboard. He took a long swig and eased himself into his favorite rocker. There was a sharp knock at the door. He looked at his watch. *A little early, but at least it's the right night.*

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Clem climbed back out of his rocker and opened the door. "Cum on in, Dunk — "

"You're fat!"

Where Dunky should be stood a shriveled old lady. She shoved her valise in Clem's arms and pushed past him into the fishhouse. "Where's Abby?"

Clem took a deep breath and slowly released it. In a month fraught with corpses, morticians, and gravediggers, he could have done without a visit from his mother-in-law, the Widow Cobb.

Still, even she could not bring him down. "Wot brings ye t' Clabberd, Muth-ah Cobb?"

"I'm here t' see Abby."

"She's a'ready gone, de-ah. Jus shipped out 'bout an hour ago."

"You're a fat liar!"

The Widow Cobb searched high and low, an activity that did not take long in the tiny fishhouse, but could find no trace of her daughter. "She's gone!"

"Ayuh, de-ah. I a'ready said that."

The Widow Cobb snatched the valise back from Clem's arms. "Well, I cahn't go all th' way back t' Foggy Cove t'night, Lard Ass. I'll hafta leave tomorrer mahnin."

She scaled his rocking chair and sat with folded arms, her valise tucked protectively in her lap.

"Make yerself t' home," said Clem. Tomorrow morning could not come soon enough.

The Widow Cobb picked up his bottle of rotgut, sniffed it, and poured it out on the floor. She looked up and nodded toward the door. "Who's that, th' Village Idiot?"

Clem turned and found Dunky standing in the open doorway.

"Ah, there ye are, Dunky. Cum on in. Ye know Abby's muth-ah, don'tcha, Dunky?"

"Sure," said Dunky. "Nice t' see ye agin, Widder Cobb."

The Widow Cobb, her face like sour lemons, tightened her folded arms and huffed. "Village Idiot."

Dunky gazed at the old woman with a fond, dopey smile. Suddenly he snapped his fingers and his eyes flashed excitement.

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"Oh, Clem! Big news, big news! I ov-ah-heard th' Mayor talkin t' Homer Cheatham down at th' bait shop, an ye'll nev-ah guess wot he said?" Dunky paused, realized that Clem was not guessing, and continued. "Th' Guven-ah's cummin t' this year's clambake! Can ye believe it! Th' Guven-ah of th' whole damn State, right here at Clabberd!"

"Th' Guven-ah!" Clem was flabbergasted. "Why, that ain't big, Dunky, it's huge! I cahn't hahdly believe it!"

"It's true, I ov-ah-heard it."

"Gorry, th' guven-ah," Clem repeated to himself. "Wait a minnet. Wait jus one minnet. Ye don't think they'll make 'im Guest o' Honor, do ye? I mean, he is th' guven-ah, aft-ah all."

Dunky shook his head slowly and emphatically. "Cahn't do it, Clem. That's a'ready settled, set 'n stone. B'sides, a good man like th' Guven-ah wudn't let 'em do ye like 'at, no how. He's a fine, upstandin gen'leman, that Guven-ah. We taxpay-ahs shud b' proud t' have sucha fine civil servant werkin fer us."

"Ayuh. I nev-ah pay m' taxes an I'm still proud."

"That's th' kinda feelin he instills. Yer a lucky man, Clem Crowd-ah. This Sat'idy yer gonna serve th' biggest lopst-ah to th' biggest man in th' entire State."

"But that means...," Clem's heart sank. The guest count was once again fourteen.

"You! Hobnobbin wi' th' Guven-ah?" shouted Mrs. Cobb from her rocking perch. "Fat chance, Fat Head!"

Clem knew she was right.

The night was spent on the kitchen floor, wrapped in a threadbare quilt. His mother-in-law slept in the bed.

He woke with a stiff back and splinters. By six A.M. he'd drunk two full pots of coffee and checked his lobster inventory for a fourth time. The Widow Cobb had not stirred from bed yet, uncommon for a woman of her age and demeanor. The trip back to Foggy Cove would take most of the day. At ten A.M. he lightly rapped on the bedroom door.

"Muth-ah Cobb?"

There was no answer. He pushed the door open. "Ye gut a long trip ahead o' ye, Muth-ah Cobb. Bett-ah rise an shine."

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He walked in and found her sleeping soundly. "Mrs. Cobb?"

He shook her shoulder. "Agnes?"

Clem made his way to the vanity, found a handheld mirror, and held it close to her face. It did not fog with breath.

"Oh, Agnes." Clem pulled the blanket up and gently covered her face. Agnes Butterworth Cobb had always been bitchy toward him, even by mother-in-law standards, but Clem still loved her in his own way. He fought hard, however, and the tears did not fall.

"Muth-ah Cobb, ye were allers right. I am a fail-yah. I cahn't even afford a simple fewn'ral fer ye. An neith-ah can yer son Corn. He's a'ready gut th' fahm triple-mor'gaged."

Now a tear did slide down Clem's cheek, and he wiped it away with the back of his hand.

"I hate t' do it, but I'll have t' send ye on th' ole-fashuned way. Muth-ah Cobb, ye'll have t' settle fer a Sail-ah's Burial."

Clem went down to the storage shed and dug out an old square of sailcloth. He spread it across the bedroom floor, carefully laid the Widow Cobb on the edge of the canvas, and wrapped her around and around. Then he securely tied the bundle with pot-warp. She looked like a small, gray mummy.

"C'mon now." He picked up the bundled body and made his way to *The Belching Spider*. A Sailor's Burial was always done away from the mainland, where the ocean was deep.

Clem headed for open waters and reached the perfect spot in twenty minutes' time.

"Feel like I'm sendin ye scuddin off t' Hell in a reefed mains'l." Clem perched the body on the edge of the stern. He looked around the boat. "Bett-ah weight ye down wi' sumthin."

He tied a small anchor around her ankles. That would keep her from drifting to shore. He inspected his handiwork. Something still was not quite right.

"I knowed this is s'posed t'be a Sail-ah's Burial," said Clem. He wiped another tear from his eye. "But I jus cahn't send ye on wi'out a grave-mark-ah." He thought a moment. "I gut jus th' thing." He reached for a camouflaged buoy and tied it around her neck.

Clem always hated long good-byes. The anchored mummy hit the

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water with a stupendous *splash*. He waited until the camouflaged buoy bobbed to the surface.

Clem wiped away his third and final tear. "Abby wud o' wanted it this way."

It was Friday and *something* was bothering Clem. Something urgent. He couldn't quite put a finger on it. It was important. Something he'd forgotten, but shouldn't have.

Clem was hauling his sou'east string of traps when "Muth-ah Cobb's brooch!" blurted from his mouth. The outburst startled him. What did it mean?

He remembered.

"Mrs. Crowd-ah allers said she wanted her muth-ah's brooch whenev-ah she passed on." It was a family heirloom, and Clem knew his wife would never forgive him if he lost it. He changed course and headed for a point beyond his sou'east string.

"Good thing that I marked th' grave aft-ah all." Clem gaffed the camouflaged buoy. He wound in the line. The pot-warp coiled at his feet. Agnes Cobb came up with relative ease, compared to Blinky and the pauper.

She breached the surface. Clem could see where part of the sailcloth had come loose. "Don' guess I tied it very tight."

Clem grabbed two handfuls of sailcloth and yanked it into the boat. The body landed face-first in the bilge water. He rolled her onto her back.

The brooch had been fastened tightly under the Widow Cobb's neck since the day he'd met her. Clem reached down, then quickly drew his hands back in sudden surprise. The brooch was gone! In its place was a lobster of horrifying dimensions. He almost did not believe his own eyes. It was enormous.

It was a lobster fit for a king. Or a governor.

The day was a gorgeous bitch. Clem looked up and staggered under the sensual impact of a rich azure sky filled with dappled clouds and sharp-winged gulls. Sunlight saturated the velvety salt-sea air. He closed his eyes and felt a mild breeze rustle gently through the thin locks of his hair. Today was the Clapboard Island Annual Clambake.

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Sounds of children's laughter sang out over the din. Kites competed with wheeling seabirds for airspace. The scent of sweet corn and pies wafted in the air, mingling and complimenting the smells of lobsters and clams. These had been carefully packed under the coal-heated beach sand and slow-cooked throughout the day. The aroma was everywhere and irresistible.

Clem walked through the crowd with a confidence he hadn't felt in years. It was a young man's confidence, an invincibility, quite different from the hardened conviction acquired later in life. It felt good. He spoke casually and at length with both Mayor Nayes and the Governor, and would have done so with the President himself if he'd been on hand.

The townsfolk mingled and cajoled in the ways of a small town world. Women discussed their pies for the annual bakeoff, and lied to each other about their secret ingredients. Husbands ogled at the busty, nineteen-year-old Widow Baudelaire from the corners of their eyes. Mothers kept their children a safe distance from the ever-lurking Gargamel Stinch. Mayor Nayes and the Governor maintained a relentless regiment of politicking.

Twice Clem was cornered by Captain Inermo Sane, the Harbor Master, who rattled off story after story, all supposedly true, through his ventriloquist dummy. The dummy was carved to his very likeness, down to the briar pipe, and was the only way the captain would speak.

The time approached. Clem shaded his eyes with a hand and looked down toward the beach. He confirmed that, yes, the chefs on the waterfront had removed the lobsters and clams from their sandy ovens.

The dinner bell rang. "C'mon, Cap'n Sane," said Clem. "It's lopst-ah time!"

"Ayuh," said the dummy.

The crowd slowly shuffled toward the picnic tables. Many long minutes passed before everyone was seated. Clem took his station at the front edge of the long table. He was anxious now for the presentation ceremony to begin. Many more minutes passed as the mayor, then the Governor, made unnecessarily longwinded speeches. The formalities mercifully ended and Clem shook the cramps from his legs.

The moment was now upon him. The waterfront chefs, hidden from the view of the general crowd, were carefully arranging large silver platters

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on a wheeled serving cart. Dunky would follow behind him (a privilege initially reserved for Mrs. Crowder) with the cart, from which Clem would remove the platters one by one and present them to each guest in turn.

Dunky strained behind the enormous cart, which miraculously held all fourteen lobsters. Clem sauntered in the front, with slow, easy steps, and stopped before the first guest, Saul Newberg.

The wholesaler sat with a fork clutched in one hand and a nutcracker in the other. His long, black beard was carefully tucked under a bib. Clem reached for a platter with both hands and carefully set it on the table.

"*Oy Vay!*" said Saul. His curled locks bounced with anticipation. "That lobster's got *chutzpah!*"

Clem nodded agreement and moved on to the next guest. This was the Harbor Master, Captain Sane. The captain frowned disappointedly when the silver platter was laid before him. Clem did not understand. Dunky fumbled in his shirt pocket, withdrew a small wooden lobster, and placed it in front of the captain's ventriloquist dummy. The Harbor Master grinned from ear to ear. Clem turned to Dunky and patted him on the back. Who else but Dunky Drinkwater could anticipate Captain Sane's reaction, then sit down to whittle him a tiny lobster the night before?

The two continued down the line. Clem searched the cart for the smallest of his large lobsters when he stopped to serve Patty Shenanigan, the new fish warden. He had been the butt of Patty's irritating practical jokes on several occasions and wasn't yet convinced that the foolish Irishman wouldn't pull one now. He cautiously set the platter down.

"Sure an' begorra!" Patty's clay pipe hung loosely in his mouth.

"Yeah, an I hope ye choke on it," Clem muttered under his breath, and moved on.

"Good afternoon, Clem." Clem winced at the oily-smooth voice of the mortician. Mordecai sported his sickly non-smile, and still wore his traditional black, even in the heat of the day. There was a twinkle in his cold, reptilian eyes when the lobster was placed before him.

"Today we are cannibals by proxy," proclaimed the mortician. "Let us dine on the flesh of our brethren."

Clem visibly flinched and hurried on. The guests on either side of the mortician shot him wary glances, then slid their chairs away as inconspicuously as possible.

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Clem was relieved to see the face of his brother-in-law, Cornelius Cobb. The unworldly farmer gaped at the enormous lobster placed before him.

"Gorry! I think m' luck has fin'lly changed, Clem. I can feel it." Corn rubbed his eyes in disbelief. "An t' top it all, I gut a lett-ah from Ma. She's cummin up from Foggy Cove to attend this year's Clambake. I expect she'll be here any minnet now...."

Clem patted Corn on the hand. "We need t' talk lat-ah," he said, and moved on.

Lobsters were given to Moody, Dunmore, and Pratt, the town selectmen. Next came Mayor Nayes. The mayor seemed flustered, and looked at Clem with accusing eyes. The problem was evident. Sitting between him and the governor was Good-Foot Toussaint. The obnoxious Frenchman regaled the politicians with inappropriate stories of sex, murder, and more sex. For the first time in their lives, the two bureaucrats were speechless. On more than one occasion they wondered why a gravedigger from the mainland was sitting at the table of honored guests.

Clem quickly fumbled three lobsters onto the table. He hoped to move on before catching the unwanted attention of Good-Foot. The gravedigger, spouting filth with his usual alacrity, lit a new cigarette from the dying embers of his old one, and flicked the defunct butt squarely into Clem's face.

"Eh? *Excusez-moi, m'sieur.* Oh, eet eez you, Mr. Crowd-air! How eez your new playmate, eh? He eez keeping you very happy, no?" Good-Foot rocked back and forth with an uncontrollable laugh, slapping the politicians' backs in an affectionate, though painful, manner. Clem used the laughing fit as a means to escape.

The cart was now down to a single, lone lobster. Clem picked it up and placed it at his own table setting, a table angled from but adjacent to the other honored guests. This was the post of the solitary Guest of Honor.

Clem took his seat and faced the rolling fields of picnic tables. The townsfolk were served their own meals of average-sized lobsters by the waterfront chefs.

He turned and looked across the faces of his own honored guests. They would eat at his signal. Generally the mayor would slip in an impromptu speech at this point, but Good-Foot seemed to have doused his oratory fire

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for the moment. Clem raised his chin, a reversed head-tilt that meant "*begin.*"

The feasting began. The snap-and-crack of lobster shells rang through the summer air, followed by the dunk-and-slurp of butter-dipped meat. Clem looked upon the greedy, greasy faces and smiled. Perhaps a few principles had been compromised. Perhaps a law or two had been broken. Even so, it was all worthwhile. The Crowder name would go down in the history of Clapboard Island.

Clem looked down at his own lobster. He reached for the obligatory utensils and found that his place setting didn't include them. He looked around, signaled for Dunky's attention, and made fork-and-knife hand-gestures while shrugging his shoulders. It took nearly a minute, but Dunky eventually interpreted the signals correctly. He was off on the hunt for silverware.

Minutes ticked by. Clem sampled a few steamed clams and took a small nibble of his blueberry cake. Everything tasted fine. His lobster beckoned. Just when he thought he could wait no longer, Dunky arrived with a fork and nutcracker.

"Here ye're, Clem. Sorry it took s'long. Enjoy." Dunky returned to his own table.

Now. Clem placed a monstrous claw between the jaws of the nutcracker and squeezed. The thick shell defied him, and he wished for a pair of pliers. He squeezed again, putting his back into it. There was a sharp report and the great claw splintered. The insides were exposed. Steam rose off the savory meat, which he carefully removed in one solid slab.

He sopped the edible chunk in his butter bowl, letting the golden juice completely saturate the dense meat. Slowly he raised the dripping flesh to his mouth.

An odd noise, something between a hiccup and a belch, stayed his hand. He looked out amongst his honored guests. Patty Shenanigan was rising to his feet, clutching his stomach with both arms. "Saints preserve us," he said, and fell over backward.

Clem's eyes flashed anger. This was no time for one of Patty's senseless practical jokes! The rest of the crowd went slack-faced. Corn stood up next. He weaved back and forth. "Th' meat, it's a li'l sour, Clem, once ye get inta it." This he demonstrated by throwing up all over the table.

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It was merely the invitation everyone else needed. Saul fell forward. Puke dribbled in his great beard. Moody, Dunmore, and Pratt let fly, in that order. Mordecai held it in, but looked green. The color suited him. Good-Foot laughed uncontrollably as he vomited on Mayor Nayes and the Governor, in a continuous alternating fashion.

The rancid stench of nausea wafted on the summer breeze and settled on the townsfolk. It was more than they could bear. The picnic tables shook with the convulsive sounds of their retching and heaving. The fields flowed thick with vomit.

Clem's jaw dropped. He looked down at the greasy pink lobster meat in his own hand.

He sniffed it. It didn't smell rancid.

He tore it open and rolled the meat between his thumb and forefinger. The consistency was good.

He put a tiny piece on his tongue.

And immediately spat it out.

The meat had a flavor unlike anything he'd tasted before. It was not the taste of shellfish, nor of anything else that called the ocean home. Neither did it resemble beef, pork, or chicken. It was a taste unique to itself. It was the taste of human flesh.

Clem had no experience for comparison, but a voice at the back of his mind told him it was so.

His own stomach turned, and he staggered out over the growing sea of sickness. Dizziness came. He leaned forward and steadied himself with both hands on his knees. His own wave of nausea churned within. Something wriggled in the gray ooze below him. His eyes screwed into focus.

It was a human finger.

He recoiled from the sight, slipped back on what looked like a human ear, and crashed headlong into the great checkerboard table. Platters and lobster shells plumed in the air. His arms tangled in the stringy mass of Saul Newberg's beard. Patty Shenanigan convulsed at his feet, spewing like a geyser. There was a pinky-toe in it.

Several good yanks and his arms were free of the knotted beard. He felt a cold, hard orb pressed tightly in the palm of his right hand. Clem unfurled his fingers to find a yellowish glass eye.

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He worked his way slowly down the table, crossing one hand over the other to steady his position. The governor was spread out across the far end, his head turned to one side. A steady trickle poured from his mouth. It formed a rivulet down the tablecloth and pooled on the ground. A fleck of silver gleamed brightly in the sticky puddle. Clem picked it up and held it toward the noonday sun. The Widow Cobb's brooch glinted shrewdly.

From behind, a great sucking sound swamped the world. Clem pirouetted like a drunk ballerina. The vomit-sea danced before his eyes with an unnatural grace. Slowly it swirled, picking up the pace in an ever-quickening arc. Soon it was a miniature whirlpool at his feet.

A featureless glob bubbled from the center of the vortex. It frothed and grew taller, then boiled and spat and molded itself into a rough estimate of a human form.

Clem rubbed his eyes. The identity of the slimy mass was unmistakable. It staggered one step toward him, then another. They stood, face to face. Neither flinched for a moment or so. Then Clem carefully handed over the glass eye.

The gooey figure took the yellowish orb and screwed it back into its empty eye socket. Slowly it turned to one side. Directly behind it was another slippery shape, this one shorter and somehow uglier. It moved in close.

"You're fat!" it gurgled. Clem reached in his pocket and handed over the brooch.

The second horror turned to join the first, and both trudged off toward the oceanfront together. Clem blinked for the first time in several minutes. Relief wailed from his lips like a lone steam-whistle. They were going. The abominations had what they wanted and were going.

The sucking vortex sputtered again. Clem's relief-wail caught in his throat. A third form gushed forth as the others had before. It perambulated forward and stood close, closer than the first two, its chunky nose nearly rubbing Clem's own.

Clem turned his pants' pockets inside out, spread his hands wide and shrugged his shoulders. He had nothing left to give.

Suddenly the creature's two creamy hands shot forward and grabbed Clem by the ears. His head was held firm, helplessly locked in a vice-grip. He parted his lips to scream.

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The monster pulled in, pressed its oily lips against his, and planted one oozing, slurpy kiss.

Clem did not move. His arms hung limply by his side. His lips dribbled with slime. The monster pulled away and turned toward the waterfront.

Clem's eyes shifted about. The fields of picnic tables were lifeless, strewn with the unconscious forms of the sick-weary townsfolk. He scanned over the checkerboard table. The honored guests were senseless. Not a soul was left standing. Clapboard Island was oblivious to the world, and to the unnatural events that transpired.

He looked back toward the waterfront. The three putrid forms slid down into the Atlantic and were gone. Clem pulled the handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped the cold sweat from his brow. Almost as an afterthought he wiped the goo from his lips.

A dynamite blast kicked Clem in the ass and sent him skidding headfirst across the sea of vomit. He rubbed the mucus from his eyes just in time to see a tawny, gummy she-goat march indignantly into the sea.

DUNKY DRINKWATER jiggled the doorknob. The Crowder fishhouse was locked tight as a drum. He pried up the loose plank board on the pier, found the spare key, and let himself in.

Clem was in his rocker, alone in the dark.

"Don' feel like cump'ny," he said.

"Ah, Clem, don' be glum. Look." Dunky offered him the newspaper folded under his arm. "Guess th' Crowd-ah name will go down in Clabberd's hist'ry books aft-ah all."

Clem unfolded *The Island Times* and slipped on his reading glasses. "*Slime Monster Spotted Along Beachfront!*" He blanched. "Wot's that gut t' do wi' me!"

"Not that article, Clem. Th' headline."

"Oh. Lessee. *Local Man Kills Governor.*" Clem wadded up the paper and tossed it to the floor. Under his breath he muttered, "A' least he was th' only casu'lty."

The two men were silent for a moment. Dunky walked over to the window and raised the sash. Morning sun fell into the room.

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"Look at th' bright side, Clem. A' least Mrs. Crowd-ah weren't here t' see it."

Clem joined Dunky at the window and both looked out over the sea. A weary smile, wan and fleeting, passed across his face.

"Sumhow she a'ready knows, Dunky. Sumhow she knows."

COMING ATTRACTIONS

THE NEXT FEW ISSUES promise to be good ones—we have several knockout stories edging and jostling each other for position like groupies at a rock concert, all trying to get close to the star. Take a look at some of these gems:

"Dragon's Gate" by Pat Murphy is our cover story in August, a wintry tale of a storyteller on a reluctant quest to the dragon's lair.

"Pictures from an Expedition" by Alex Irvine takes us to Mars with a small crew who are definitely not your father's astronauts. This one is a space race story for the Twenty-First Century.

"Hooyoo Love" marks Fred Chappell's first appearance in our pages—it's a wry satire about the latest thing in alien/human behavior.

"The Navatar" by Jerry Oltion introduces us to an AI car driver with ambitions.

"Hunter Lake" by Gene Wolfe is a subtle new story from the master.

Richard Paul Russo, Dale Bailey, Esther Friesner, and Terry Bisson are some of the other writers whose stories are maneuvering to get space in the big October/November anniversary issue. Which ones will make it? Subscribe now to make sure you'll find out.

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As soon as their father is gone, Mrs. Grimble (the local witch) gives the two girls a potion which temporarily transforms them into kangaroos. Meanwhile, Major Palfrey has been captured by Count Hulagu, an Eastern European dictator. Both girls end up in Hulagu's dungeon with their father. Rescue arrives in the form of two weird dwarfish men, who sing duets while they tunnel through the earth.

The Wind on the Moon was written in the darkest days of World War II. The villain in this children's novel is clearly based on Hitler, but he is no Chaplinized buffoon. Count Hulagu is a deadly antagonist, with thousands of eager disciples ready to capture Dinah and Dorinda. The fantasy events in *The Wind on the Moon* possess a dark compelling logic.

Eric Linklater (1899–1974) was born in Wales but spent most of his life in the Orkneys, with long sojourns in China, India, and the United States. He published more than forty books, including *A Spell for Old Bones* (1949), a fantasy set in first-century Scotland. His marriage (to a cousin of mine) produced two sons, for whom Linklater wrote *The Wind on the Moon*. This fantasy classic won the Carnegie Medal in the year it was published, and has remained in print ever since.

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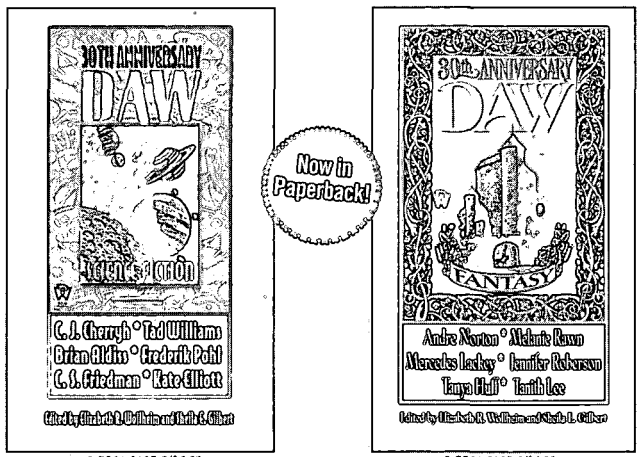

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